

PROBLEM AWARENESS AND IMAGING:
THE CHURCH'S FIRST STEPS TOWARD STRENGTHENING RURAL COMMUNITIES

by

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A professional project
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology at Claremont
May 1983

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my wife without whose help this project would have never been completed and my friends Dean Freudenberger and Dan Rhoades for their help, concern, and encouragement in the writing of this project.

In love and hope, my wife and I dedicate this project to our first child, who is at this moment waiting to be born.

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ABSTRACT

American agriculture is far different today than it was at the turn of the century. New Technology has allowed farmers to produce more crops in less time using less labor than was ever imagined before. Technology has allowed this country to produce a great amount of food and many structures have grown up in order to support this end.

As a result of these new structures and the Technology supporting them, many negative consequences have arisen. Among these is a significant deterioration of land, air, and water resources and quality.

The consequences of modern Technology upon the way America farms confronts the church in the rural community. The impact of modern Technology on rural communities has been both widespread and destructive. It has affected in some way practically every rural community in the United States and has been so pervasive that it has damaged not only the physical makeup of rural communities, but the social and spiritual as well.

The rural church has been directly affected by the physical, social, and spiritual losses experienced in the communities it serves. As a result, the rural church of today has lost membership, income, power, prestige, leadership, influence, and many of its traditional functions within the communities it serves. The church in rural America today is sick, and in many cases dying, and the tragedy is that it seems to be able to do little to halt the trends which threaten its survival.

By combining the concepts of covenant and stewardship as they have been expanded by the people of God over the last 3000 years, a renewed image emerges which can provide the rural church with an expanded sense of its role, purpose, responsibility, and relationship to God and creation.

This renewed self understanding if adopted by the rural church could provide it with the means by which it might take the first steps in bringing strength back to rural communities. This strengthening of rural communities would be facilitated by the church through providing a new awareness of the problems facing rural America today. The strengthening of rural communities would further be facilitated through providing a foundation for analysis of the underlying causes of the problems facing rural America.

Finally, strengthening would be facilitated through providing a basis for action.

INTRODUCTION

Problem Addressed by This Project

Due to the complexity of the problems threatening rural life in America, coupled with the church's lack of contemporary images with which to analyze these problems, the church has been largely ineffective in producing positive change in rural communities.

Importance of This Problem

American farms have changed radically over the past 100 years. New technologies have allowed farmers to produce more crops in less time using less labor than was ever imagined before. Technology has allowed this country to produce a great amount of food. Many new infrastructures have grown up in order to support this goal. These structures are political, economic, and social in nature, and all are supported by the use of high Technology farming methods.¹

As a result of these new structures and the technologies supporting them, many negative consequences have arisen. Among these is a significant deterioration of land, air, and water resources. Also these structures, especially the corporate farming structures, can be seen as producing negative consequences upon people, primarily in terms of their health and lifestyle patterns.²

¹R. Rodefeld, Change in Rural America (St. Louis: Mosby, 1978), 1.

²Ibid., 1-10.

The impact of modern Technology has been felt in some way in practically every rural community in the United States and has been so pervasive that it has damaged not only the physical makeup of rural communities, but the social and spiritual makeup as well. As a result of modern Technology and its supporting structures, rural communities have changed dramatically over the last 75 years. Once rich in the basic substances needed to produce crops, rural communities find themselves today nearing the end of a once-believed inexhaustible supply of soil, water, and air.³

Rural communities further find themselves daily being drained of their lifeblood in the form of low profit margins, population losses, service, and business relocation, and the collapse of community structures. Thus the once socially stable rural community finds itself in the midst of an extremely unstable social climate.⁴ Finally, the community that was once regarded as possessing an extraordinary sense of direction and purpose, today finds itself experiencing an acute sense of powerlessness and dislocation. This loss of spiritual strength has left the rural community searching for images to bring meaning back to life and a goal for which it can once again strive.⁵

Traditionally this goal and this image were provided for the rural community by the church. However, today the rural church has been

³W. T. Martin, "Ecological Change in Satellite Rural Areas," American Sociological Review 22 (1957), 173-82.

⁴S. Green, "Struggle for Survival," Engage/Social Action 42 (October 1978), 10-20.

⁵D. Ensminger, "Rural Neighborhoods and Communities," in Change in Rural America (St. Louis: Mosby, 1978).

directly affected by the physical, social, and spiritual losses experienced in the communities it serves. As a result, the rural church of today has lost membership, income, power, prestige, leadership, influence, and many of the traditional functions within the communities it serves.⁶ In most cases the church in rural America today is sick, and in many cases dying. The tragedy is that it seems to be able to do little to halt the trends which threaten its survival.

Thesis

It is the intention of this project to bring to light the trends which are threatening the continuance of healthy rural life in this country, to examine the church's apparent failure to halt these trends, and to suggest images with which the rural church can begin to expand its influence in the communities it serves.

Definition of Major Terms

Problem awareness. The task of problem awareness is to make the invisible visible and the inaudible heard. Problem awareness seeks to shatter amnesia, forcing memory into activity. Its goal is to reveal to us, our church, and the world the extent of the problems facing rural America today.⁷

Imaging. Both our personal and societal lives are steeped in rich images that provide us with a symbolic understanding of our most

⁶ A. Lindgren and N. Shenebach, Management of Your Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 61-63.

⁷ Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Food Policy, 110 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, January 1980.

basic roles, purposes, responsibilities, and relationships. Without such images to provide us with a graphic description or pictorial representation of the ways in which we perceive reality and truth, it would be extremely difficult for us to be aware of our unique place in creation. Imaging is the process by which we develop these images and thus become aware of their significance in the shaping of our day-to-day decision-making.⁸

The church. In general, the term church is used throughout this project in the New Testament sense, to refer to the body of Christian believers. It is recognized that this body is manifested in many differing forms under many differing names and that the one church may be said to consist of many individual churches. Specifically, the term is used to refer to the United Methodist Church, but in light of the general definition, can be expanded to include all denominations.

Rural communities. Rural communities in this country are located in areas which are primarily geared toward basic agricultural production. These communities are characterized by a particular population, located in a particular area, interrelated through a particular set of institutions. Rural communities are further identified by the existence of a population agglomeration organized through some form of local government. The boundaries of these communities are usually indistinct but commonly include both a central densely-settled region and a

⁸V. H. Kooy, "Images," in Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), II, 681.

relatively isolated area served by the center.⁹

The rural church. The term rural church is used here to describe those churches which are located within the boundaries of rural communities and are primarily directed toward serving the people within that community.

Healthy rural life. Healthy rural life seeks a just society in which human dignity is recognized, human rights respected, and human needs are fulfilled. It further seeks a society in which freedom is celebrated, power is shared, and all members have some say about the shape of the future. Finally, it seeks a society in which the integrity of the environment is respected, the biological and social systems that nurture and support life are neither depleted nor poisoned, and in which all decisions are made with due regard for the carrying capacity of our future earth.¹⁰

Spirituality. Throughout the body of this project references to the human spirit, spirituality, and spiritual crisis are used with reference to a notion of spirit which "distinguishes that aspect of life which is more than the life of the senses and is descriptive of the qualities and fruits of life having to do with the inner, deeper nature of humanity and its relationship to God and creation."¹¹ This view is

⁹B. Jessie, The Community (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

¹⁰Identifying a Food Policy, Agenda for the 80s (Washington: Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Food Policy, 1980).

¹¹H. D. Edwards, "Educational Aspects of Spiritual Direction in Roman Catholic Thought," Rel. D. Project, School of Theology at Claremont, June 1968.

held on the conviction that humanity is in part a spiritual being or soul which has an existence in a dimension of state that transcends the material nature of things and yet is in part a physical being which exists wholly within the realm of nature.

Work Previously Done in the Field

As dust storms covered houses and crops in the 1930s, scholars began to look more intensely at trends in agriculture that up to that time had been taken for granted. At first the notion of conservation was stressed. Washington appointed experts to look at agricultural issues in a rational, unsentimental, and technically-proficient manner.¹² These first researchers were mainly ecologists interested in "the management of the organic order for human well-being."¹³ Unfortunately, these ecologists were ignorant of other issues which were integrally coupled with their goals. They ignored sociological, economic, and ethical topics of discussion and thus failed to achieve a coordinated program of understanding in which experts from different disciplines worked together toward a common end, i.e., full understanding of agricultural issues.

Over the years, however, researchers from each of these disciplines have joined the ecologists in studying agricultural issues. Thus today there exists a body of knowledge which provides for a many-faceted view of American agriculture. Each of these facets answers many

¹²D. Worster, Dust Bowl (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 198.

¹³*Ibid.*, 200.

questions concerning the state of American agriculture today, but each raises additional questions as well.

Walter Goldschmidt confronts one of the most basic conflicts in American agriculture--that of the ownership and control of the land. He is centrally concerned with the conflict between independent small landholders and giant corporations. Specifically, he is interested in the effects of the alteration of the basic organization of agricultural production (i.e., the small family farm) implicit in the growth of corporate farming in America.¹⁴

In an attempt to discover the consequences of corporate farming for the character of rural American life, Goldschmidt devised three studies. The first was a detailed examination of one rural community in regard to the effects upon it as a result of industrialized production of agricultural goods. The second study was a comparison of two comparable towns, one predominantly populated by family farms and the other by a corporate enterprise. The third study was an examination of the influences of corporate farming on national institutions beyond rural communities.

The results of Goldschmidt's first study concluded that the major social consequence of industrialization upon rural communities was urbanization. Goldschmidt found that in communities dominated by corporate farms, a disruption of traditional equality, independence, and self-reliance occurred and was replaced by a rigid class division

¹⁴W. Goldschmidt, As You Sow (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmund, 1978), XLI.

between ownership, management, and labor. This in turn resulted in great social alienation and feelings of powerlessness and normlessness. The combination of the above consequences of urbanization was believed by Goldschmidt to have led to reduced concern for the community by all of the class groups, which in turn caused the deterioration of educational facilities, social organizations, and religious institutions.

In the second study, Goldschmidt found the community dominated by family farms to be significantly more healthy. This finding was confirmed 30 years later by Green, who found that in all factors measured, the family farm community proved healthier than the corporate farming community. Goldschmidt's sociological analysis of rural communities concludes that healthy rural life is threatened through corporate control of the land, and further prophesizes that unless something is done to halt this trend, the situation will get worse.

The question that Goldschmidt fails to address adequately but which is of extreme importance to the understanding of the problems threatening healthy rural life is: given the disadvantages presented by corporate farming, especially to rural communities, why has this continued to be the dominant trend in U.S. agriculture as reflected in the disappearance of over 4,000,000 family farm units within the last 35 years?¹⁵

This question is taken up by Michael Perelman. According to Perelman, the prevalence of corporate farms in the U.S. is directly tied to the government's agricultural policy and our present economic

¹⁵Green, 12.

system. The result of our government's agricultural policies, says Perelman, has been the following. In order that agriculture could produce enough food to feed not only our country but also to achieve its international goals of foreign exchange earnings, new technology was introduced so that farms could produce more from the available land. The cost of this technology, however, rose to the point where only large federally-supported enterprises could afford to use it. Large enterprises in turn meant increased production, but this increase in production rather than filling a need for food, produced a flooded market. In order to realize a profit in the now flooded market, the farming enterprises had to increase production (profit through volume) which in turn caused the market to become even more flooded. The ramifications of this runaway system are numerous. For instance, since the system depends upon new technology to keep it going, i.e., to produce larger and larger yields per acre, the entire farm industry has been forced, whether they like it or not, to buy into this technology. This technology, however, has many inherent flaws. For example, it is inefficient. Because of its great dependence upon petroleum and petroleum byproducts, it has been estimated that farming using the new technology uses 100 calories of fuel to produce 1 calorie of food!

Another ramification of the runaway system is the fact that since World War II, nearly two-thirds of the nation's farms have disappeared. During the same time, however, farm production has increased and acreage in agriculture has declined only slightly. The question is: what happened to the over 4 million farms that disappeared? A large part of the answer is that they became the victims of corporate

farming and the attitude that big is better. They simply could not compete with the large operations for they became caught in the squeeze between drastic drops in prices for their crops and drastic increases in prices for merchandise they needed to farm with. As a result, they were forced to sell their farms to the large corporations and get out.¹⁶

Thus Perelman concludes that "farms today are designed to grow one product--profit--and efficiency in agriculture rests on one idea--does it pay? Anything else you hear is a myth."¹⁷ Perelman's economics leave us with an answer to the question of why America farms the way it does, but we are left with a new question: what is the result of this type of farming on the land?

Wendell Berry states, "The concentration of farmland into larger and larger holdings and fewer and fewer lands--with the consequent increase of overhead, debt and dependence on machines is a matter of complex significance."¹⁸ Berry is primarily concerned with the question of how we relate to our land and he states, "Now that the corporate revolution has so determinedly invaded the farmland, we are faced with a significant crisis."¹⁹

According to Berry:

Modern agricultural practice concentrates almost exclusively on the productive phase of the natural cycle. The means of production

¹⁶M. Perelman, Farming for Profit in a Hungry World (Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld, Osmund, 1977), 21-62.

¹⁷Ibid., 3.

¹⁸W. Berry, The Unsettling of America (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977), 44.

¹⁹Ibid., 63.

become more and more elaborate all the time, but the means of return--the building of health and fertility in the soil--are reduced more and more to the shorthand of chemicals.²⁰

According to the industrial vision of farming, the life of the farm does not rise and fall in the turning cycle of the year; it rather goes on in a straight line from one harvest to another. In the long run, says Berry, this may well be more productive of waste than of anything else. It wastes the soil--it wastes the animal manures and other organic residues that industrialized agriculture fails to return to the soil. And what may be the largest agricultural waste is the garbage and sewage that are flushed into the rivers.

According to another ecologist, Tyler Miller, to recognize the extent of corporate agriculture impact upon the land, we must realize that our world is held together by and functions through a complex system of interactions and relationships. One of the basic components of this system is the land. Since the world is a system, whatever is done to one component of the system will affect all the other parts of that system to some degree. Therefore, whatever is loosed upon the land will be felt in the sea, the atmosphere, the climate and by all living things therein.

Only one-third of our world is dry land and of this, only a small percentage is of any significant use to us (i.e., forest, agriculture, mining, water) and this is being depleted or wasted each day. The waste of this usable land is a result of our ever-increasing

²⁰W. Berry, "Where Cities and Farms Come Together," in Radical Agriculture (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 17.

ability, through technology, to put this land into production. This increase in production has allowed our population to increase dramatically, while at the same time has raised our standard of living. But these benefits have been bought at a high price. The price is that each day we destroy more usable land. Each two bushels of grain destroy one bushel of topsoil. Each crop destroys thousands of gallons of water due to pollution. Each spraying of insecticide and fertilizer uses up both petroleum and minerals. In short, we are using the land beyond its ability to replenish itself and if we continue this practice, we will decrease the amount of usable land to a point at which it can no longer sustain us. That is, there simply will not be enough food or water or minerals or air to sustain the population.²¹

Up to this point the discussion of the issues threatening healthy rural life has been carried on by individuals in fields of specialization "outside" the church. Now our attention is turned to a question of ethics which rises out of the above trends in U.S. agriculture. The question specifically is: how did this happen? What images allowed this situation to progress to such a critical point as described by Goldschmidt, Perelman, Berry, and Miller?

I believe an answer can be partly found in the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular which has arisen in the modern era. To an ever-increasing degree, people of the modern era have adopted secularism.²²

²¹T. Miller, Living in the Environment (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1975), 52.

²²B. Meland, The Secularization of Modern Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

This is an attitude that places its ultimate responsibility with people and its ultimate trust in science. It is an attitude that acknowledges only tangible, i.e., testable and human, affairs and disavows any other worldly or other-than-human authority. Secularism believes that together, science and its workhorse, technology, can achieve anything the human mind can envision.²³

In opposition to this view stands the sacred. This attitude affirms values that are rooted in the eternal and other worldly. It is the view of traditional religion and it is in direct opposition to the secular at almost every point, but most basically where it affirms God's authority above all else and places people in a role of subservience. The sacred, although degrading to human importance, is nevertheless a safe place to hide if one is seeking to escape a world which is traditionally seen as hostile, tainted, and incomprehensible.²⁴ During the course of this century, the sacred has been devaluated by the impact of both the forces of science and technology on our lives. Through these powerful tools we have shown that we, and not some transcendent God, hold authority and all the earth is bowing to our voices. Thus the sacred's claim of our subservience and all that goes with it seems to be overruled. Indeed our faith is so strong in the God's science and technology, rather than in the God of the Bible, that even when we perceive that science and technology may be getting out of hand and causing us serious problems, we still believe that if we just have faith in them, science and

²³J. MacQuarrie, God and Secularity (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

²⁴Ibid., 97.

technology will show us an answer that will solve all the problems. Even if we doubt, even if we do not believe they can help, where do we turn? To what we perceive (as modern people) to be impotent? There is nowhere to turn!

Scope and Limitations of the Project

It is the intent of this project to bring to light those issues which are threatening rural life in America and to provide the church with images which it can use to address those issues as they relate to individual communities. It is not within the scope of this project to provide specific solutions to the problems facing individual communities. That task must be accomplished by church leadership at the local level. Nor is it within the scope of this project to address every issue that threatens rural life; that would take volumes. It is the intent of this project rather to help increase the church's awareness of the major trends in American agriculture that have contributed to the disintegration of rural life and to propose images which the church can use as foundations for interpretation of these trends. It is hoped that through this project the church may be empowered to take the first steps toward strengthening the communities which it serves.

Procedure for Integration

The idea for this project flows from and is deeply rooted in the images of covenant and stewardship. It is an attempt to show how these images necessitate our interpreting what is happening in our world in light of our beliefs. To this end many diverse fields of specialization

must be integrated. The sections of this project, exploring the problems faced by both rural communities and rural churches, rely on the functional disciplines of sociology, economics, ecology, and management. The section exploring the church's use of the images of covenant and stewardship relies on the theological disciplines of ethics and exegesis.

The method to be used in this project is primarily library research, although I will rely heavily on my year-long internship in the rural church for the section of the project dealing with the rural church. The methodology to be used is problem solving, that is, to state the problem, define its dimensions, and suggest approaches which may empower the church to contribute toward solutions.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One traces the changes in American Agricultural Technology over the past century and discusses the impact these changes have had, both directly and indirectly, on the way America farms. Although this chapter shows Technology to be the apparent cause of many problems facing rural America, it points to a deeper cause underlying the present dilemma in rural America which is spiritual rather than Technological in nature.

Chapter Two is focused toward the impact present-day farming techniques have had on rural communities and the rural church. It outlines the physical, social, and spiritual losses experienced by the rural church and the communities it serves and discusses the church's apparent failure to address adequately the underlying spiritual problems plaguing rural America today.

Chapter Three explains the images of covenant and stewardship as they have been developed over the past 3,000 years and suggests that part of the church's failure to address adequately the problems facing rural America today can be seen as resulting from the entrenchment of those images within the spiritual life of the church. It is further suggested that an expanded understanding of these images might be used as a foundation from which the rural church could begin to address the underlying spiritual crisis present in American agriculture today, thereby taking the first step toward strengthening rural communities in this country.

Chapter Four provides a summary of the project and conclusions derived from the argument presented. It further suggests subsequent steps the church needs to take in order to bring rural communities back to life.

Chapter I

AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY: ITS NATURE AND CONSEQUENCES
UPON U.S. AGRICULTUREThe Nature of Past Technology

The agrarian transformation, which began with the industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century and snowballed from World War I to the present, is more than anything else, a technological transformation.¹

As recently as seventy-five years ago a majority of this nation's population was engaged in farming. We were an agrarian nation with agrarian concerns. The basic lifestyle of our people was rooted in the land and our basic livelihood was derived from the farm. The farms of the early twentieth century were far different from the farms of today, for they were fundamentally subsistence-oriented. Farm families grew just enough to meet their personal needs with perhaps a little left over to barter or sell. Livestock was raised to provide the family with meat and with a power source, not for sale. Seed for the next year's crop was carefully selected from this year's harvest and the earth was replenished through crop rotation. In this way and others, the farm was also a self-sufficient enterprise. Power was supplied by horses and mules and water was pumped by hand. Plowing, planting, harvesting, and storing were all done by simple machines owned by the farmer. Farmers built their own houses out of wood they felled and shaped on land they

¹R. Rodefeld, Change in Rural America (St. Louis: Mosby, 1978), 1.

cleared with their own animals. The farmer was indeed master of his own destiny; his only adversary, the land and the elements.²

As this nation grew, stretching out its shape across the Appalachians, the Mississippi, the Great Plains, and the Rockies, more and more farms sprang up to cover the land. This was a frontier time when just about anyone could obtain a piece of land and become a farmer. Many of these settlers knew nothing about farming, but they learned from others and through trial and error. As a result, the number of acres under cultivation began to increase steadily, a trend which continued until the 1950s when, because of reasons to be discussed later, the numbers declined to roughly the present figure of 332 million acres.³

Although the exact way one farmed varied during this period depending upon what section of the country one was in, the technology used by farmers was similar all across the nation. In the early part of this century, the most common source of power was animal, primarily horse power and human power. In some areas steam engines were used, mostly for threshing, but they had no mobility and were too expensive for the average farmer to own. Soil was fertilized almost exclusively by organic substances--horse and cow manure, primarily. Nitrogen was fixed through crop rotation and the practice of planting nitrogen-rich plants and letting the land lay fallow. Human labor was used in harvesting and for chores such as milking, feeding, weaving, washing, cooking, watering, etc.

²Ibid., 15.

³Summary of Appraisal, Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1980).

Most farms were family enterprises, where children were considered assets for their ability to work the farm. Farms did, however, employ a significant percentage of the population and provided for the livelihood of most of the nation's hired workers. Fields were commonly divided into one hundred acre parcels and it was common that about thirty-three acres out of each hundred would actually be cultivated. Because of this, crop yields were modest but adequate for the subsistence nature of these farms. Farming during this time in history was more an art than a science. Family skills were passed down from generation to generation and most of what served as agricultural science was actually conventional wisdom.⁴

The above represents basically the way this nation farmed until approximately 1920. It represents a picture that many of us, especially those raised in the city, still hold of the farm today. We think of the farm as a place where a family of dedicated individuals full of conventional wisdom and old knowledge steadfastly raise crops, feed chickens, milk cows, and drive around in buggies pulled by the family's old mare. Unfortunately for our dreams at least, few notions could be further from the reality of the modern farm.

The Nature of Modern Farm Technology

The farm of today is as radically different from its counterpart of one hundred years ago as the space shuttle is from the Wright brothers' first plane at Kitty Hawk. This transformation of an industry,

⁴Rodefeld, 17.

not to mention a lifestyle, can be seen as occurring as a direct result of two major revolutions. These revolutions were not only responsible for the transformation of agriculture, but of many other industries as well. Nevertheless, few other industries felt their impact as sharply. These revolutions were the mechanical and the technological⁵ and they continue even today to be the driving force behind the way this nation farms.

The mechanical revolution can be said to have started with the introduction of the all-purpose tractor in the latter part of the 1920s. This machine combined the strength of the steam engine with the mobility of the horse, all at an affordable price. This tractor, along with the farm machinery once pulled by horses, could plow, disk, harrow, cultivate, mow, stack, and harvest. It never needed water to drink or food to eat or, most significantly, time to rest. With it, one man could do the work of ten, faster and cheaper. It is no wonder that this machine, over the period of fifty years, virtually eliminated the horse from the farm. As an illustration of just how dramatic this transformation was, in 1930 the Department of Agriculture listed nineteen million horses and mules as laboring animals on American farms. By 1970, they no longer even bothered to list the number of horses and mules but they did indicate nearly six million tractors in use.⁶ Needless to say, the tractor was an immediate success.

⁵The mechanical and technological revolutions are the two main sub-headings of what this project refers to as High Technology or, simply, Technology.

⁶Rodefeld, 16.

Encouraged by the tractor's reception, manufacturers soon came out with other machines to help the farmer do his job. Combines appeared which did the job of many machines, combining the functions of the tractor, the picker, the sorter, and the stacker. Harvesters appeared which cut, stripped, separated, and stored just about any grain crop. Pickers appeared for use with cotton, tomatoes, peas, apples, etc. Soon there was a machine that could do just about any job a person could do, both faster and cheaper. About the only job left for the farmer was driving the machine, and even that job is in jeopardy today. As a result, it is virtually possible to farm today without ever touching the earth or working up a sweat, not to mention all the other traditional chores of the farmer.

With the introduction of these machines, one man was able to do far more work in one day than was ever before possible. As a result, man-hours declined from a national average of 23 billion in 1930 to 15 billion in 1950 to 7 billion in 1970. This also meant that output per man hour rose proportionately until today it is approximately ten times what it was in 1930.⁷ All this is to say that machines allowed the farmer to get more work done, using fewer people in less time.

The second revolution responsible for transforming American agriculture was the technological. This technological revolution was in many ways more powerful and further reaching in its impact than the mechanical, and yet because of its subtlety has not been as well understood. The technological revolution began with the introduction of

⁷Ibid., 18.

hybrid seeds in the 1930s. Up until this time, seed selection had been done on the farm with the farmer saving the sturdiest plants for seed stock while consuming the rest. But with the advent of hybrid seeds which were derived from combining heavy-yielding stock with sturdy pest-resistant stock, the practice of seed selection was replaced by the technology of seed breeding. The use of hybrid seeds, coupled with other technology, had a remarkable effect on farming, for it increased the expected yields of corn and other plants 20-25 percent.⁸

But this was only the beginning of the technological revolution. Hybridization alone was just the tip of the iceberg, for the real impact of agricultural technology lay in the industries that supported the use of these new super seeds. "Up to WWII," write Dorst and Baily,

corn typically was grown in a three-year rotation of corn-oats-clover, without fertilizer, in forty inch rows, planted 10,000 seeds to the acre, and the corn belt yield was about thirty-eight bushels an acre. Today corn seldom is rotated. Leading growers typically fertilize with 150 pounds of nitrogen, plant 25,000 seeds to the acre in twenty inch rows, control weeds with herbicides, and get yields of 130-135 bushels an acre.⁹

Within this scenario are contained many of the reasons for the changes in American agriculture. First, because crop rotation was stopped, some form of artificial soil renewal was needed. Thus a new industry arose to provide inorganic fertilizer. This, coupled with the fact that tractors had by now virtually replaced the horse, meant that the farmer was almost totally dependent on outside sources of fertilizer.

⁸Ibid., 16.

⁹Yearbook of Agriculture (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 6.

Secondly, because hybrid seeds allowed farmers to plant huge sections of land with one crop, they became susceptible to both diseases and insects that thrive on the weakness of mono-cultural farming techniques. To avoid having whole crops wiped out, farmers began to spray regularly. Thus another industry grew up to accommodate this demand and the birth of the pesticide companies was ushered in. Again the farmer was dependent upon an outside industry in order to farm.

Thirdly, because crops were sown in closer rows and more than twice as many plants were grown per acre, land or even machine weed control became impossible so herbicides came into general use and, with them, the birth of another dependency for the farmer.

The farmer gladly traded his independence, however; for although America was farming approximately the same acreage as it had in 1900, it was producing twice the yield. This, of course, meant that the farmer was making more money, and who wouldn't trade a little independence when one could grow twenty-eight bushels of wheat where he once grew fourteen, or 4,500 pounds of rice instead of 2,100 or 2,000 pounds of tobacco compared to 775, or 1,750 pounds of peanuts as compared to 700, or 26 bushels of soybeans instead of 13.¹⁰

These spectacular increases in crop yields led many optimists to conclude that starvation was about to be eliminated from the face of the earth and the new technology was hailed as the cornucopia. The seed had indeed been planted that would change the way America farmed and the American lifestyle in general. But as to the exact shape that

¹⁰Ibid., 8.

change would take, few were sure.

As it turned out, the mechanical and technological revolutions had both direct and indirect influences on American agriculture. The direct influences mainly took the form of visible extrapolations of trends already discussed. In terms of mechanization, farmers began to use more and more machines to do more and more of the work. In terms of technology, new hybrids were developed, along with corresponding growth in supporting industries. As a result, the farmer became more and more dependent upon outside industries until today, although one farmer may appear to work one thousand acres singlehandedly, he and his brothers and sisters are supported by some ten million man-hours nationally per year.¹¹

As staggering as the direct results of mechanization and technology appear, the more subtle indirect changes may be more significant in the long run. Because of the massive increases in yields brought about through technology and mechanization, it is understandable that farms of today are producing far more than they themselves can consume, which in turn means that farming today has shifted from a subsistence orientation to a market orientation. This shift was not made simply to provide more food, however, but out of the farmers' need for cash to pay for the services of the many industries that now supported his farming.

Another indirect result of farming's new methods has been the increasing specialization of farms. As the market orientation of the

¹¹M. Perelman, "Farming with Petroleum," Environment 14 (October 1972), 8-13.

farm became more established, so did the demand for large quantities of produce. Thus, to make money, the farmer was forced to grow one huge crop where he once grew several smaller, more diversified crops. Once this shift was made, it was almost impossible for the farmer to go back to diversified farming. This was due to the huge initial investment required to get into large-yield monocropping in the first place. For once a farmer made the decision to enter the competitive market system which led to greater income, he was required to buy the specialized technology of that system as well as the mechanization that supported that system. In this way he was trapped, for to get back his initial investment he was committed to large-scale monocropping for good. This trend has become so widespread that even in low income areas, farms have become so specialized in their crop production that most farm families buy a significant proportion of their food from supermarkets, only supplying a part of their meat, chicken, egg, milk, and vegetable needs from on-farm sources.¹²

Technology and mechanization have indirectly changed farming in another way--that of product specialization and quality. In the past, each farmer was free to pick the type of crop he wanted to plant, the specific strain of that crop he thought best suited his farm, and the amount of growth that plant would be given. The farmer controlled the irrigation, the fertilizing, and the picking of the crop as well as all other aspects of its development. The success of the farmer depended on the weather, his ability to work, and the knowledge he had

¹²Yearbook of Agriculture, 7.

of farming. Today things are different. The farmer knows that the market is demanding and endeavors to produce his crop in order to meet that demand as closely as is technologically possible. The farmer of today no longer relies solely on wisdom passed down from generation to generation. Instead he uses well-established techniques and processes that all but eliminate the guesswork of farming. Of course, to achieve this sort of production control, farming by necessity became more standardized, until today farmers know exactly "the amount of fertilizer, element by element to use, the row spacing most advantageous, and the correct plant population for top yields."¹³

Due to the combined influences of a market orientation which necessitates large-scale cropping mechanization and specialized production techniques which depend on high technology for consistent quality, the farmer of today can no longer afford to be diversified. Because of this, much of the traditional work of the farm has now moved to outside industries such as seed companies, processing plants, feed lots, slaughtering houses, dairies, etc. The indirect result of this trend has been the movement of a large segment of the population away from rural areas, where they no longer can find work, to urban areas, where the establishment of these new industries has produced new jobs.¹⁴

The direct and the indirect changes in the way America farms have resulted in fewer farms. Today there are about 900,000 fewer operating farms than in 1960 and there are four million fewer farms

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴S. Green, "Can the Family Farm Be Saved?" (Elsa Forum--45).

than in 1930. Most of these casualties have occurred in farms whose product sales were under \$10,000 per year. In fact, say Dorst and Baily,

There are now 184,000 farms whose product sales are above \$10,000 with the greatest percentage increase in growth being among those farms whose sales are above \$40,000. Because of this, more than four out of five dollars worth of farm products are produced on farms with sales over \$10,000 per year.¹⁵

Part of the decline in farms is due to a reduction in cultivated land, but mainly the decline is due to economics. As a result of farming's shift to a market-oriented, specialized, production-conscious way of doing business, it became necessary for farms to grow. This growth was the result of flooded markets which kept prices down, which meant low returns, which necessitated more production to show a profit. Those small farms which could not enter into this escalating market-production cycle were quickly taken over by larger farms eager to acquire more land in order to expand. Thus while there may be some 900,000 fewer farms today than in 1960, this has occurred without the loss of any significant number of acres in cultivation.¹⁶

The net result of all of this has been a rise in farm size and the emergence of corporate farming enterprises. These large farms and corporations have combined to accelerate the trends in agriculture's use of mechanization and technology. This acceleration has had many consequences both positive and negative for American agriculture and the world.

¹⁵Yearbook of Agriculture, 8.

¹⁶Green, 3.

Consequences of This New Technology

The transformation which has occurred within American agriculture as a result of technological and mechanical innovations has had both positive and negative consequences for the farmer as well as the rest of the nation.

On the positive side, the agrarian transformation has resulted in better incomes for farm families and in less labor intensive work for farmhands. Most significant, however, has been the rise in crop yield which has allowed one farm to feed approximately ten times the number of people it could at the turn of the century.¹⁷

These benefits, however, are believed by many to have been bought at too high a price. Many voices are today speaking out against the negative consequences of technology and mechanization. One of these voices is Michael Perelman, who writes:

In the United States, farmers use the average tractor four hundred hours per year. Since the average tractor is about forty horsepower, we can estimate that each tractor represents about sixteen thousand horsepower hours of use. Assuming that the average tractor consumes about one-tenth of a gallon of fuel per horsepower hour, then its use represents sixteen hundred gallons of fuel per year. Since we have six million tractors in the U.S., we can estimate that tractors alone consume about eight billion gallons of fuel.

These eight billion gallons represent about 1,000 trillion BTU of heat value. The average American consumes about twelve thousand BTU daily, or an annual rate of consumption of about 4,380,000 BTU, the equivalent of about thirty gallons of gasoline. Since our population is about 200 million, we consume as food about 876 trillion BTU; the energy value of the food crops we consume in the U.S. is therefore about equal to the energy we burn in our tractors alone.¹⁸

¹⁷Rodefald, 82.

¹⁸Perelman.

But tractors are not the only users of petroleum in the agricultural enterprise. Fertilizer, too, consumes energy. In fact, U.S. farms consume about 7.5 million tons of nitrogen fertilizer, the equivalent of some 1.5 billion gallons of gasoline.¹⁹ This story goes on and on, for just about every aspect of modern-day farming consumes petroleum. The problem is that we are growing food at a deficit, for we use on the average five times as much petroleum in producing a crop as that crop yields in food energy. This means that for every BTU of heat energy we consume as food, we have spent five BTU of heat energy to produce it.²⁰ One can see that at this rate it won't be long before we run out of energy to produce the food and then the food itself.

The tragedy here is not that agriculture is the main user of energy, for it is not. The point is that of all the users of energy, agriculture is the only one that could, if it so desired, produce more energy than it consumed. Agriculture could be energy-producing, for crops capture the energy of the sun and store it in a highly useful form. If only we could kick the petroleum habit in agriculture, this possibility could some day be a reality. Until then, the consequences of our highly mechanized and technological farming methods put agriculture at the top of the list of petroleum-consuming industries,²¹ a dubious distinction at best in this petroleum-starved world.

Today's farming methods have not only given agriculture a

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

petroleum habit, but a chemical habit as well. "It is clear," says Argyle Skolas,

that U.S. farming depends on chemicals of all sorts. Among these are chemical fertilizers and pesticides for crops plus preventative and curative medicines and synthetic growth-inducing feeds for livestock.

A look at a few statistics will indicate the degree of chemical consumption in American agriculture. Use of nitrate and phosphate fertilizers in the most recent years has average fifty million tons. During the calendar year 1976, agriculture used 661 million pounds of pesticides. Some analysts conclude that our use of pesticides will double within the next 25-30 years.²²

Most of these fertilizers and chemicals are derivatives of petroleum and thus add to that dependency, but more significant are their side effects. Chemicals are used by farmers as a result of two trends already discussed. First, they are used to enrich the soil, a move necessitated by the lack of crop rotation. Second, they are needed to fight weeds and bugs that thrive on the huge monocultures that are so productive to large-scale farmers. The side effects of this use are that each day thousands of tons of chemicals are being washed out of the fields and into our waterways. This has resulted in massive contamination of rivers and streams which has proven to be harmful to both animal and human life. Further, spraying has caused large amounts of chemicals to become airborne, both polluting the air and traveling great distances to settle in and contaminate still other water sources.

As the trends in American agriculture continue to move in the direction of accelerated large-scale farming and its dependency on petrochemicals and fuel, the consequence of that use, energy depletion and massive pollution, will also accelerate.

²²Farming the Lord's Land (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 166.

The consequences of large-scale farming are further complicated by other factors as well. For instance, Lester Brown writes,

In the Western Plains--Nebraska, western Kansas, Colorado, and Wyoming, the withdrawal of underground water now exceeds the rate of natural recharge. As water tables fall, pumping costs rise, until eventually farmers can no longer afford to irrigate.²³

The depletion of underground aquifers that took millions of years to develop is a catastrophe. Some experts predict that in the next thirty to fifty years most of these aquifers will be depleted. The question arises: where will the water which is basic to farming come from?

Another factor basic to farming is soil, and yet it too is being depleted through large-scale farming techniques. In the U.S. it is estimated that soil loss from sheet and rill erosion will reach 9-20 tons per acre per year. This equals about two bushels of soil for every single bushel of grain.²⁴ Further, the organic content of the soil which remains has declined 50 percent in the last one hundred years. These two trends combined have developed a soil reserve that cannot be replaced within the next two generations.

These trends would seem to indicate that we cannot continue our present manner of agricultural production without eventually wearing out our resources.²⁵ We simply cannot continue to grow crops by mining the natural resources of this earth and if we continue, says Bob Bergland, "we will be on a collision course with disaster."²⁶

²³L. Brown, "The Worldwide Loss of Cropland" (World Watch Paper #24) (Washington: October 1978).

²⁴Farming the Lord's Land, 125.

²⁵Ibid., 134.

²⁶Ibid., 131.

This disaster will stem from the fact that we, as humans, are dependent upon this earth for our survival. We are part of this complex living machine we call an ecosystem, and the quality of our lives depends upon the quality of that system. We have seen how the present trends in American agriculture have helped us pollute and deplete this system. Now let us turn to what this means to us as members of that system.

Every human activity depends on the integrity and proper functioning of the ecosystem. Without the ecosystem's green plants, there would be no oxygen. Without the action of plants and animals in the aquatic systems, there would be no pure water. Without the biological processes that have gone on in the soil for thousands of years, there would be neither food, oil, nor coal. This ecosystem is thus our biological capital, the basic apparatus on which our total productivity depends. If it is destroyed, agriculture, industry, society, and life itself will cease.

In our search for the benefits of modern technology, we have become enticed into a fatal illusion: that we have escaped from our dependence on the rest of nature. The truth is that we have become more dependent on it, while at the same time taxing the web of environmental processes through technology, at nearly all its most vulnerable points. Thus we are quickly approaching the point of no return. Our very survival is at stake.²⁷

²⁷ B. Commoner, "Can We Survive?" Washington Monthly 17 (May 1969), 52-63.

The prospect of the total destruction of the ecosystem is one very real consequence of the way America farms. Another more immediate consequence is the destruction of a lifestyle, or standard of living that once was taken for granted, but is now disappearing as quickly as our natural resources.

According to Goldschmidt, the infiltration of the corporation into agriculture is having a profound effect on the economic and social relationships of rural America. For instance, traditionally rural communities have placed high value on equality, independence, and self-reliance. "These values," says Goldschmidt, "have shaped a social structure which is relatively free of class division."²⁸ However, under the corporate pattern of ownership, the picture changes. Instead of a society free of class division, an urban-industrial division between ownership, management, and labor emerges. This division of classes results in a system of social destructions, which leaves the area with basically two classes--one with power and one without. According to Goldschmidt, the economically and socially advantaged group looks outside the rural community for both economic and social needs. This results in the withering of both local business and social organizations.

A study reported in the 1978 issue of National Land for People compares two rural communities: one in an area surrounded by small farms and one in an area controlled by corporately-owned agribusiness farms. The study found that the small farm community was significantly more healthy economically and socially than was the agribusiness

²⁸W. Goldschmidt, As You Sow (Montclair, N.J.: Allenheld, Osmund, 1978).

community. Specifically, they found that in the area surrounded by small farms; population was greater; businesses were more numerous and more diverse; there were more hospitals, doctors, dentists, and churches; and the gross value of farm production was greater.

Another effect of the corporate influence on agriculture was the attitude it produced toward labor. Goldschmidt states that the attitude of large farm operators, who hire all their work done, is to seek profit from the service of those whom they employ. Their interest is for an "ample supply of labor obtainable for wages as low as is consistent with the maintenance of prices for farm products,"²⁹ because the larger group of workers that they can draw from, the easier they can be obtained when wanted and with less demand for high wages and accommodations.

Thus Goldschmidt has shown that communities where large corporate farms predominate are less healthy than are communities where small farms predominate. This lack of health can be seen in such socially stressful situations as decreases in farm owners, resident owners, farms in general, resident farmers, resident owner-operators, resident lease-operators, full-time farmers, part-time farmers, people living on the land, gross value of farm production, property values, population in general, number of businesses, number of plants, value of retail sales, hospitals, doctors, dentists, schools, and churches.³⁰ Another result of agribusiness farming techniques has been that land prices have risen to a point beyond which the average person can afford to buy.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Green, 5.

This, in turn, adds to the concentration of agricultural wealth in the hands of a few large operators.³¹

Still another consequence of corporate farming has been its influence on federal regulations. Many feel that corporations have used their political power to push regulations which favor the large operator, and thus leave the small farmer and rural community feeling powerless to determine their own fate. Due to this powerlessness, small farmers and rural communities are increasingly hostile toward any attempts by outside agencies to tell them what to do, how to farm, or how to live.³² Thus, faced by a situation they have little power to do anything about and surrounded by forces they cannot control, the rural communities of this nation withdraw into themselves, waiting for the inevitable.

Agriculture's Spiritual Crisis

It has been said that what we do can never be divorced from what we are. If this is indeed true, then the consequences of the way America farms are as much a result of the human spirit as they are of Technology. In fact, it is the firm stance of this project that Technology serves as an instrument which allows the basic desires of the human spirit to be magnified beyond that which has ever been possible before. Thus the underlying causes of both the physical and social catastrophes discussed above are spiritual rather than Technological in nature.

That this is indeed the case has been discussed by many

³¹Goldschmidt.

³²Ibid.

individuals in many different ways over the years. Robert Flaherty in his film The Land discussed this point in a purely visual manner. By presenting the views of American agriculture during the Depression years, Flaherty paints a vivid picture of disaster. He shows the effects of erosion, pollution, large-scale farming, lack of crop rotation, and all the other consequences of Technology, including especially the devastation of social structures and individuals. Flaherty's film, however, was made well before modern agricultural Technology had become a significant factor in American farming. Thus Flaherty's film points to a basic trend, that of destruction of the land, as being well established before modern Technology.³³

This theme is even present in ancient literature. Walter Bruggemann discusses Israel's knowledge of its spiritual responsibility toward the land. He says:

One of the major demands of the history of Israel is caring management of the land. Their major temptation in this regard was to use up the land in wasteful, careless, self-indulgent ways and in this way, they eventually lost the land.³⁴

Bruggeman goes on to discuss the history of Israel's relationship to the land and in so doing confirms the notion that the basic problem faced by humanity in its relationship to the land is indeed spiritual.

Examples of the spiritual nature of the relationship between humanity and the land can be found in the literature of practically every civilization ever to inhabit this earth.³⁵ And despite the fact

³³R. Flaherty, The Land, School of Theology Flaherty Research Collection.

³⁴W. Bruggeman, The Land (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

³⁵D. Freudenberg, class notes.

that no other civilization has ever had the potential for destruction that we possess, they all managed to use up the land in wasteful, careless, self-indulgent ways.

In light of this, modern Technology should not be attacked as the cause of our present agricultural problems. Rather, it should be seen for what it is--an extremely powerful tool. Like any tool, Technology serves the desires and the spirit of its user and thus, if we seek a solution to the problems of modern American agriculture, we must deal with the source--the human spirit.

Summary

American agriculture is far different today than it was at the turn of the century. New Technology has allowed farmers to produce more crops in less time using less labor than was ever imagined before. Technology has allowed this country to produce a great amount of food and many structures have grown up in order to support this end. Most of these structures are either political, economic, or social; but all support the use of high Technology farming methods.

As a result of these new structures and the Technology supporting them, many negative consequences have arisen. Among these is a significant deterioration of land, air, and water resources and quality. Also these structures, especially the corporate farming structures, can be seen as producing negative consequences upon people, primarily in terms of their health and lifestyle patterns.

Technology, however, is not the underlying cause of all these problems, for the problem goes much deeper. The problem is fundamentally

a problem of the human spirit, which technology only serves as a powerful tool, magnifying trends which have been well established in humanity for generations.

Chapter II

THE CHURCH: ITS FUNCTION AND PURPOSE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Impact of Technology
on Rural Communities

In order to define the function and purpose of an institution, it is helpful if one comprehends the primary system within which the institution functions. For the rural church, this primary system is the community or communities in which it ministers. Thus in order to examine the church in rural America today, one must first interpret the community system in which the rural church interacts. It is important to note here that each community system is unique, for each is made up of a particular population in a particular area, interrelated through a particular set of institutions. Community systems are further identified by: the existence of a population agglomeration organized through some form of local government; indistinct boundaries which include both a central, densely-settled region and a relatively isolated area served by the center; and unique physical, social, and spiritual bonds among the residents which give each community its own individual atmosphere.¹

The uniqueness of individual communities would seem to rule out the possibility of generalizations. However, experts tend to agree that since communities are themselves parts of larger systems of interactions which in turn are part of even larger systems, one can, on the

¹J. Bernard, The Community (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

basis of national trends, generalize back to individual communities.²

National trends in American agriculture toward increased dependency upon high Technology farming methods have affected in some way practically every rural community in the United States and have been so pervasive that they have affected not only the physical makeup of rural communities, but the social and spiritual as well.³ It has been stated by Barry Commoner that the growing number of high technology corporate farms in the United States has caused a great burden on the ability of the environment to maintain itself.⁴

Airborne chemicals resulting from internal combustion engines; aerial spraying of herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizer; and emissions from rural/urban factories have caused the air quality in many rural communities to be significantly affected. This, coupled with the airborne pollution from large metropolitan areas largely specializing in agricultural support industries, has caused unhealthy air in many rural areas and has resulted in smog alert situations in many seemingly pristine countrysides.⁵

As significant as the deterioration of good air is to the quality of life in rural communities, soil and water depletion is greater still, for these two resources form the basis of the entire rural economy. In

²Ibid.

³W. Martin, "Ecological Change in Satellite Rural Areas," American Sociological Review 22 (1957), 173-182.

⁴B. Commoner, "Can We Survive?" Washington Monthly 17 (May 1969), 52-63.

⁵Martin.

1975, the Soil Conservation Service estimated that the annual soil loss on U.S. crop land alone was almost three billion tons or an average of nine tons per acre. This soil, which sustains agriculture, cannot be replaced within our lifetime or the lifetime of our children. Once soil has been depleted, no amount of chemical substitutes will make up the loss.⁶

Rural communities which once prided themselves on the richness of their soil and grew economically and socially strong as a result of this wealth, today find themselves in serious trouble. Soil erosion is literally stripping these communities of their livelihood. Soil loss is only half the problem, however. It is estimated that at the present time most rural communities are overstressing their water supplies significantly. This means that the amount of water being pumped out of the nation's aquifers is greater than the amount of water being recharged. At the present rate of consumption, many water supplies will be exhausted in fifty years, which means that many rural communities will literally dry up and blow away.⁷

The combined influence of soil and water exhaustion means that many rural communities are physically dying. Those communities that were resource marginal to start with have already gone; those that remain grow weaker each day. The infusions of life brought about through the use of chemical soil additives and bigger and better pumps and canal

⁶D. Freudenberger, "Managing the Land and Water," in Farming the Lord's Land (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).

⁷Ibid.

systems is only prolonging the end. Without quality soil and water resources, rural communities simply cannot exist.

In regard to social losses experienced by rural communities, it can be seen, as with the physical losses, that modern agricultural practices have weakened rural communities' chances for survival. Shirley Green has shown that large-scale production techniques have caused a "get big or get out" mentality in American agriculture. The impact of this trend on small rural communities has been that, as large producers flood the market with goods and services, the price for those goods and services drops. For the large producers that make up in volume what they lose in profit margins, this is not a significant threat. But for the small farmer or business facing high production costs, low profit margins mean disaster.

Thus, this cost-price squeeze, as it is called, has resulted in a drop in the total income for small farms and businesses in rural communities. This decline of income to rural communities has resulted in the disappearance of some two-thirds of the nation's farms in the last generation, the failure of two out of every five rural businesses, and a shrinkage of services within the communities such as doctors, lawyers, mechanics, electricians, and carpenters.⁸ These are sacrifices the rural communities of this country can ill afford. For it has been shown that small farms and businesses are efficient producers, conserving soil, water, and other natural resources. Thus their disappearance serves as an aggravation to the problems already faced by rural

⁸S. Green, "Struggle for Survival," Engage/Social Action 42 (October 1978), 10-20.

communities.⁹

The decline of income and the resultant loss of businesses caused by the cost-price squeeze has had other ramifications for the rural community. As businesses close and farms are absorbed, the people who once lived in the community move away. This not only makes it more difficult for the businesses that remain to make a profit, it also means the loss of many institutions that supported the larger population. As opportunities for employment decrease, more and more young families are leaving rural communities with their children. As children leave rural communities, schools close and community centers fold. Those that remain find that they must search elsewhere for education and recreation or find themselves traveling great distances for both. This draining away of children and young families from rural communities also means that these communities are becoming dominated by older people, many of whom will soon retire from farming and other businesses. As they retire, their businesses either close up for good or are bought by large investors for lack of young people to take over the reins.

The decrease of population within rural communities not only makes the community less attractive to outside businesses and prospective community members, but it also means a decline in political power and a certain degree of self-determination. Many rural communities have been forced, due to low tax revenues, to ask state and county governments to supply such support services as law enforcement, refuse removal, and fire fighters. This, in turn, has left the communities with

⁹ Ibid.

less say in the functioning of these support organizations and thus less say in their own self-determination. Political power has been reduced in these communities through a loss of voters and diminished revenue for political support. As these communities become smaller and poorer, candidates and elected officials are less interested in courting their favors, concentrating, rather, on larger, richer communities. As a result, these small communities have little impact on state or county government and receive little more than charity from them.¹⁰

The erosion of physical and social resources in rural communities has left the inhabitants feeling largely powerless to effect change and with a sense of non-direction for the future. Ensinger reports that, when asked to list the major problems facing rural communities today, members of these communities list decline of power over one's own life, collapse of a sense of community, loss of self-esteem, and dwindling social norms as being among the most pressing and worrisome.¹¹ These factors which fall under the heading of spiritual decline are perhaps the most serious faced by rural communities today, for they point to a sickness that is crippling the very heart of the community.

It can be seen that, as a result of modern Technology and its supporting structures, rural communities have changed dramatically over the last seventy-five years. Once rich in the basic substances needed to produce crops, rural communities today find themselves nearing the end of a once-believed inexhaustible supply of soil and water. Rural

¹⁰D. Ensinger, "Rural Neighborhoods and Communities," in Change in Rural America (St. Louis: Mosby, 1978).

¹¹Ibid.

communities further find themselves daily being drained of their life-blood in the form of low profit margins, population losses, service and business relocation, and the collapse of community structures. Thus, the once socially stable rural community finds itself in the midst of an extremely unstable social climate. Finally, the community that was once regarded as possessing an almost manifest sense of destiny and an extraordinary sense of direction and purpose today finds itself experiencing an acute sense of powerlessness and dislocation. This decline of spiritual strength has left the rural community searching for images to bring meaning back to life and a goal for which it can once again strive.

These, then, are the trends which are crippling the physical, social, and spiritual life of rural communities all across this nation. Unless these trends are reversed, our society is in danger of finding rural communities nothing more than company towns run by large-scale agriculture, while at the same time experiencing widespread destruction of the ecosystem largely as a result of the intensification of high Technology farming.

The Consequences of Rural Community Change on the Rural Church

The idea of the church has long been associated with the idea of community.¹² The church, like a secular community, is made up of a particular population in a particular area, interrelated through a

¹²P. S. Minear, "The Church," in Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), I, 607.

particular set of institutions. The church also is identified by some form of local government; indistinct boundaries; and unique physical, social, and spiritual bonds among its members. The church then can be thought of as a community within a community and, just as rural communities are affected by the changing trends in American agriculture, rural churches are affected by the changes in the communities in which they minister.¹³

The rural church has been directly affected by the physical, social, and spiritual attrition experienced in rural communities. In fact, each of these factors has a counterpart within the rural church, which is as destructive to and pervasive to the life of the rural church as in rural communities.¹⁴

In terms of physical erosions experienced by the rural church, there is little to say except that, as the physical environment in rural communities deteriorates, the rural church suffers. The rural church suffers through the struggles of its members to live healthy lives amidst polluted air and water and through the waste of God-given gifts like soil and energy. The rural church suffers not only because its members suffer but also because it sees the ultimate consequences of such trends, and yet is unsure of its role in combatting their acceleration. Thus the effects of waste and pollution are the same for the rural church as for rural communities and neither is likely to escape the destruction of the biosphere unless present trends are reversed and

¹³A. Lindgren and N. Shenobach, Management of Your Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 61-63.

¹⁴Ibid.

reversed soon.

Although the social and spiritual deteriorations experienced by the rural church are of no more ultimate importance than the physical, they are certainly of more direct concern to church leaders. One has only to browse the card catalog of any seminary library to determine this fact; for the amount of literature directed toward church growth and stability far exceeds that directed toward environmental concerns. This is not to say that the concern of church leaders for the growth and stability of the rural church is not warranted, for it is. The loss of membership, leadership, income, control, and influence experienced by the rural church is significant and threatens the continued existence of many rural churches in this country.¹⁵

The decline in population felt in rural communities has been experienced by the rural church as a drop in membership. The exact percentage of lost members is hard to determine, for several factors distort the statistics.¹⁶ Nevertheless, they can be approximated. It has been determined that, in the period between 1910 and 1980, rural America forfeited nearly sixteen million individuals to the cities, a decrease from thirty-two million to sixteen million people.¹⁷ During the same time, the percentage of rural people attending church dropped from

¹⁵K. R. Krause, "The Rural Church and Rural Change," United Church Herald (May 15, 1965), 14.

¹⁶R. Smith, Rural Ministry and the Changing Community (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).

¹⁷G. Fuguitt, "The City and Countryside," Rural Sociology 28:3 (September 1963), 246-61.

65 percent in 1910 to 44 percent in 1960. Combining these two statistics shows that, in 1910, some 21 million people attended rural churches each week, while some fifty years later, only one-third of that number, seven million rural people, did the same.¹⁸

This substantial drop in membership has been especially hard on the rural church due to the fact that most of those fourteen million lost members were young people with small children. As a result, rural church programs geared to youth, young adults, and children have closed down, leaving no place for those who remain to plug in. Further, due to the decline in numbers of young families attending rural churches, the mean age of rural church members has increased from twenty-eight years in 1910 to approximately forty-five years in 1960. Beale has stated:

Once the median age of a population passes thirty-five years, deaths are likely to begin to exceed births and a condition occurs in which the community declines in population both from migration and because there are more deaths than births.¹⁹

Thus the rural church is in a situation where, each year, membership declines and no new prospects appear to take their places.

This "lingering death" is further aggravated by the fact that today nearly one-fourth of rural church members are over sixty-five years of age and collecting Social Security. This fact, coupled with the failure of rural business and rural income in general, has resulted

¹⁸Gallup Opinion Index, No. 70 (April 1971).

¹⁹C. Beal, "Quantitative Dimensions of Decline and Stability among Rural Communities," in Communities Left Behind (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974).

in the rural church losing revenue as well as membership.²⁰ This reduction in revenue over the past fifty years has meant that the rural church is now more dependent upon denominational support than ever before. Today more and more rural churches are receiving financial support from state and national boards and agencies for such varied uses as ministerial support, educational programs, mortgages, maintenance, etc. Many rural churches are thus unable to stand on their own two feet financially and, as a result, have been forced either to curtail activities, consolidate with other churches (forming yoked congregations or group ministries), or close down.²¹

The rural church today can thus be characterized as old, in terms of membership age; sick, in terms of membership decline; and poor, in terms of financial stability. As a result, the rural church has experienced reductions in both the political control it once had within its governmental structure and the ability to determine its own future. It has been estimated that, in 1910, approximately two-thirds of all the churches in the United States were rural. Today this figure has reversed itself, leaving the rural church with only one-third of the total.²²

In most denominations today, decisions are made with majority approval and, as a result, legislation favoring the urban church has stood a significantly greater chance of passing than that favoring the rural. Programs, centers, special appointments, and grants have been

²⁰Ibid.

²¹C. Clark, Rural Churches in Transition (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1959).

²²Smith.

significantly more often given to urban churches in the last ten years than to rural churches, in spite of the fact that rural churches have had the greater need.²³

As a result of this reduction of political power, coupled with a greater dependence upon denominational structures for support, the rural church has lost a certain amount of self-determination. Today the rural church is mainly functioning under structures it had little say in adopting and running programs which were, many times, developed outside of its community. The rural church thus finds itself in a difficult situation, for to disregard the structures or refuse the programs could mean the eventual withdrawal of denominational support which, in turn, could mean the closing of the church. But to continue to function under imported structures and with pre-packaged programs means a diminishment of self-determination and with it, respect.

A further consequence of the weakened position of the rural church lies in the effect it has upon church leadership. As members and revenues decline and the rural church's influence within the governmental body wanes, the church also becomes less able to attract experienced, well-trained, dynamic leadership. Kaufman points out that as

a disproportionate share of wealth becomes concentrated in urban areas, leadership becomes concentrated there also. This includes leadership in business, industry, the communications, transportation, fine arts, education, and religion. With respect to the latter type of leadership, the result is that young ministers are much more likely to seek appointments to churches in urban settings than to spend a career in rural settings.²⁴

²³General Minutes of the Annual Conferences (Evanston: United Methodist Church, 1972, 1976, 1980).

²⁴H. Kaufman, "What Rural Church Strategy Today?" Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin 122 (April 1966), 1-8.

The combined effects of the social erosions so far described have resulted in yet another problem for the rural church. This problem is the curtailment of influence and traditional functions the church once enjoyed in rural communities. According to Kaufman, "The rural church has traditionally been the shaper and keeper of the values and attitudes of the residents of the community."²⁵ The rural church was in many ways the center of the community physically, socially, and spiritually. It provided a sense of unity and confidence as well as a sense of security in times of crises. It stabilized and reinforced the mores and upheld the moral laws within community as well as assisting those in their spiritual development, and it ministered to the poor and needy, both within the community and beyond.²⁶

Today, partly as a result of trends both within rural communities and within the rural church, things have changed. The rural church for the most part no longer functions as it once did, for many of its traditional functions have been taken over by outside groups and agencies. The rural church today simply cannot afford to support the poor and needy in its community, so local welfare agencies have taken over this function. Likewise, the rural church can no longer afford to subsidize the social functions it once did, so this function has been taken up by local clubs and service organizations.

The function of providing security and stability within the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ C. Lively, "The Church in the Changing Rural Community," Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin 214 (1958), 1-10.

community, what there is of it, has also slipped out of the hands of the rural church and is now provided by the state and national government in the form of tax credits, social security benefits, subsidies, low interest loans, etc. In fact, just about all that is left of the traditional functions of the rural church is providing moral laws and spiritual growth, but even here it has lost ground. A recent Gallup poll showed that 64 percent of those asked stated that the church no longer held any influence on their moral conscience and 57 percent stated the church had no significant impact on their spiritual lives.²⁷

In summary, it can be seen from the above discussion that the rural church has been affected by the disease that has crippled the community in which it serves. In the past fifty years the rural church has lost membership, income, power, prestige, leadership, influence, and many of its traditional functions within the communities it serves. The rural church of today is sick and, in many cases, dying. The tragedy is that it seems to be unable to do anything to halt this trend. The church in rural America appears to be powerless to effect any change in its own situation, let alone in its communities, and yet it realizes that if something is not done and done soon, it may be too late for the church, for the community, and for the quality of rural life in general.

The Church's Attempted Solution to Rural Problems

Many of the problems facing rural communities and rural churches today are not new. For the last fifty years the question of new farming techniques and their effect on rural life has been hotly debated.

²⁷Gallup Opinion Index.

From the time the first tractor plowed the first field, experts within the church have been arguing over the effects of modern technology on the physical, social, and spiritual lives of men and women.²⁸ During the course of this argument the church has shown great concern for the welfare of the earth, its communities, and the individuals therein and its leaders have put forth various solutions in the hope of halting the destruction.

Unfortunately for the rural church and for rural communities, all the organizing, adopting, and protesting that has gone on over the years has done little to solve the problems facing rural America today. In fact, rather than solving the problems, the church's attempted solutions have, at best, served as band-aids which cover the scars and open wounds of rural America from view or, at worst, they have served to aggravate the problems, causing an intensification of their effects.

In part, the failure of the church, and society in general, in solving rural problems lies in an inability to discern underlying causes. Their apparent failure in this regard lies in a willingness to accept the most obvious cause as also the most fundamental. Because of this, the church often spends vast amounts of time and energy fighting structures and organizations that have little to do with the fundamental problem.

In regard to the erosion of natural resources experienced in rural America, it has been suggested by some within the church that much of the cause behind the pollution of our air, the waste of our water,

²⁸ Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, no. 1-250 (1935-68).

and the mining of our soil is rooted in the mechanical and Technological revolutions experienced in this nation over the past hundred years. Because of this assumption, the church has attempted to speak to these problems through addressing its statements and questions to the Technology believed to be at fault. To this end the church has supported regulations designed to control the use of petrochemicals such as herbicides, insecticides, and fertilizers. It has called for the conservation of natural resources and for personal sacrifices such as decreased water use in the home and reductions in automobile usage. It has boycotted corporations that produce harmful products and it has lobbied for regulations controlling industrial pollution outputs.²⁹

Tactics such as these, although dramatic, are of little effect and serve not as solutions but as band-aid tactics that cover the problems in busywork and our consciences in rhetoric. They are not solutions for they have not solved the problems or even slowed them down. In some instances, they have even aggravated the situation. They have aggravated the problems in that, many times, the regulations placed upon producers have resulted in increased production costs and fuel consumption, in that boycotts have resulted in the lowering of market prices, and in that controls have resulted in less efficiency and more waste.³⁰

The decline which the rural church has experienced in membership,

²⁹ Journal of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (New York: 1976), II, 1221-29.

³⁰ R. Milk, "The New Agriculture in the U.S.: A Dissenter's View," Land Economics 48:3 (August 1972), 228-35.

income, and leadership has been seen by many church leaders as resulting from the rural church's inability to attract people.³¹ In keeping with this notion, the rural church's attempted solution to these problems has taken the form of making the church more attractive to the community. The increased interest in this area can be seen reflected in the enormous popularity of the church growth movement over the last few years and in the church's willingness to make changes in liturgy and language in order to make both more contemporary.

Although these moves have had positive results in some rural churches in the form of increases in church membership, church revenue, and in understanding of liturgy, the fact remains that strategies for growth are of little use in areas where population is declining. Church growth movements, for all their positive influences, simply cannot create new jobs, increase rural incomes, revitalize rural business, or halt the loss of young families from rural communities. They may serve to halt temporarily the decline in rural church membership and revenue through attracting the previously unchurched; but, in the long run, when the community dies, so dies the church.

With respect to the church's strategy for regaining its influence and traditional functions within the rural community, the rural church has opted to become increasingly more involved in community affairs. To this end the pastor and key church members have joined community committees, commissions, and programs, in an effort to make the church's voice heard in community decision-making. The rural church's attempted

³¹General Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1980.

solution then to its apparent inability to shape and maintain the values and mores within its community has been to become more political, becoming a voting block and a lobbying force, which can make its wishes known to the community and, through democratic processes, even force its views on other community members.

This trend can be seen reflected in the increased influence of such groups as the Moral Majority, whose power lies in rural American churches. These churches, frustrated over their lack of influence in the communities in which they live, have wholeheartedly thrown their support to religious-political movements. Unfortunately for the church, movements such as the Moral Majority have failed to see that they have traded the former influence of the church, which was based on theological insights and convictions which spoke to the heart of the community's needs, for influence, which moves the church into the political arena, making it indistinguishable from other secular interest groups.

The tragedy of the rural church's attempted solutions to the trends threatening rural America today is that they have done little to halt the trends or to solve the problems. This apparent inability of the rural church to impact its community has resulted in a general feeling of powerlessness and apathy within rural churches. Pastors and other rural church leaders are frustrated by their inability to change the trends threatening healthy rural life in America today and have searched for other more potent tools to combat rural decline.

Many³² have come to the conclusion that physical, social, and

³²R. Merrill, Radical Agriculture (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

spiritual losses are not the result of Technology, although Technology has increased their deterioration; rather, they have concluded that the fault lies within the human spirit, within our inability to understand our relationship to the earth and to God. If this is indeed the case, then it is only by changing our attitudes toward creation that we can hope to halt the destruction of healthy rural life. To this end, many church leaders have called for the return to the traditional sacred teachings of the church in order to provide a basis for change.

Unfortunately, this movement, too, has failed to impact rural problems due to the chasm in today's world between the sacred and the secular. To an ever-increasing degree, people of the modern world have adopted secularism. This is an attitude that places its ultimate responsibility with people and its ultimate trust in science. It is an attitude that acknowledges only the tangible, the empirical, and the human, and disavows any other worldly or other than human authority.³³

Secularism believes that, together, science and its workhorse, Technology, can achieve anything the human mind can envision. In opposition to this view stands the sacred. This attitude affirms values that are rooted in the eternal. It is the view of traditional religion and it is in direct opposition to the secular at almost every point but, most basically, where it affirms God's authority above all else and places people in a role of subservience. The sacred, although degrading to human importance, is nevertheless a safe place to hide if one is seeking to escape a world which is traditionally seen as hostile,

³³P. Berger, The Sacred Canopy (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969).

tainted, and incomprehensible.

During the course of this century, the sacred has been devaluated by the impact of both the forces of science and Technology on our lives. Through these powerful tools, humanity has shown that it, and not some transcendent God, holds authority and all the earth is bowing to our voices. Thus the sacred's claim of our subservience and all that goes with it seems to be overruled. Indeed humanity's faith is so strong in science and Technology rather than in the God of the Bible, that even when it perceives that science and Technology may be getting out of hand and causing it serious problems, humanity still believes that if it can just have faith, science and technology will show it an answer that will solve all the problems. Even if humanity doubts, even if it does not believe science and Technology can help, where can humanity turn? To the sacred? To what is perceived to be impotent? There is nowhere to turn!³⁴

Thus one can see the present dilemma faced by those who seek to speak to the problems of rural America through a return to the traditional sacred teachings of the church. The secular, with its attitude toward the ultimate authority of people over the earth, coupled with its unshakable faith in the powers of science and Technology, has led humanity into an attitude that affirms what is presently being done to the earth. Even in the face of the facts which indicate eventual destruction due to lack of food, air, and water, the secular viewpoint still believes science and Technology will see humanity past this

³⁴J. MacQuarrie, God and Security (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

crisis. At the same time, one can see the sacred as disavowing any relationship to the earth, instead looking beyond it to another world and considering anything that happens on this world to be ultimately in God's hands.

In view of the rural church's apparent inability to impact rural problems through the use of either secular images such as consumerism, church growth, or politics, or through the use of traditional images which emphasize the sacred, the rural church would seem to be in need of renewed images which may help it serve its function and purpose in rural communities.

Summary

The impact of modern Technology on rural communities has been both widespread and destructive. It has affected in some way practically every rural community in the United States and has been so pervasive that it has damaged not only the physical makeup of rural communities but the social and spiritual as well. As a result of modern Technology and its supporting structures, rural communities have changed dramatically over the last seventy-five years. Once rich in the basic substances needed to produce crops, rural communities today find themselves nearing the end of a once-believed inexhaustible supply of soil, water, and air.

Rural communities further find themselves daily being drained of their lifeblood in the form of low profit margins, population losses, service and business relocation, and the collapse of community structures. Thus the once socially stable rural community finds itself

in the midst of an extremely unstable social climate. Finally, the community that was once regarded as possessing an extraordinary sense of direction and purpose today finds itself experiencing an acute sense of powerlessness and dislocation. This loss of spiritual strength has left the rural community searching for images to bring meaning back to life and a goal for which it can once again strive.

Traditionally, these goals and images were provided for the rural community by the church. However, today the rural church has been directly affected by the physical, social, and spiritual losses experienced in the communities it serves. As a result, the rural church of today has lost membership, income, power, prestige, leadership, influence, and many of the traditional functions within the communities it serves. The church in rural America today is sick and, in many cases, dying; and the tragedy is that it seems to be unable to do anything to halt the trends which threaten its survival.

In part, the inability of the rural church in addressing rural problems lies in its inability to discern underlying causes. Its apparent failure in this regard lies in its willingness to accept the most obvious cause as also the most fundamental. Because of this, the rural church often spends vast amounts of time and energy fighting structures and organizations that have little to do with the fundamental problems.

The apparent failure of the rural church also lies in another direction as well. Many pastors and church leaders, searching for a more potent tool with which to understand rural problems, have come to the conclusion that physical, social, and spiritual losses are not the

result of the most obvious causes, such as technology; but, rather, they have concluded that the fault lies within the human spirit, within our inability to understand our relationship to creation and to God. If this is indeed the case, then it is only by changing our attitudes toward creation that we can hope to halt the destruction of healthy rural life. To this end many church leaders have called for the return to the traditional sacred teachings of the church in order to provide a basis for change. Unfortunately, this movement has done little to impact rural communities due to the chasm in today's world between the sacred and the secular.

Thus the rural church has been ineffective in addressing rural problems through focusing on Technology and its supporting structures, because Technology is not the basic cause of the problem. It has also had little impact on the problems through returning to traditional sacred teachings, for these have been rendered largely impotent by secularization.

If the rural church is to speak to the spiritual crisis of American agriculture today, it must search beyond the notion that technology is to blame and come to see that the disease attacking healthy rural life is a disease of the soul. The rural church must therefore look past the problems inherent in the sacred-secular dichotomy and put forward new images that can be used to help lead rural American back to physical, social, and spiritual health.

Chapter III

IMAGES TO ASSIST MINISTRY IN THE RURAL CHURCH

The Need for Renewed Images

Both our personal and societal lives are steeped in rich images that provide us with a symbolic understanding of our most basic roles, purposes, responsibilities, and relationships. Without such images to provide us with a graphic description or pictorial representation of the ways in which we perceive reality and truth, it would be extremely difficult for us to be aware of our unique place in creation. Images can be used as a yardstick for determining if our actions are in accordance with our understanding of our unique place in creation.

The ways in which we picture reality and our place within it provide us with a basis for an awareness of what is happening around us. Through the use of images we are able to collect information and analyze its content in relation to our own self-understanding. Once this is done, we can then act upon that information either positively, negatively, or passively.¹

The self-image of a healthy individual or society is constantly being modified as it interacts with the world on a day-to-day basis. This ability to adapt one's images to bring them in line with reality's impact upon them is one sign of a healthy, growing organism. A problem arises, however, when images become entrenched; for to hold on to

¹V. H. Kooy, "Images," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), II, 681.

static images denies growth and can lead eventually to death.²

This entrenchment of images has been recognized by psychologists for many years as being at the root of much individual pathology, i.e., the adult whose self-understanding has never grown beyond childhood images or the individual whose images have become so entrenched that they live totally in the past.³

When such entrenchment of images occurs within an institution, it can also cause a pathology of sorts which results in the inability of that institution to perform its basic function effectively. As a result, institutions with entrenched self-images frequently find themselves out of business.⁴ (Witness the U.S. auto industry's inability to compete with foreign competition as a result of long outdated images of appropriate production techniques and labor practices.)

In the last chapter the rural church was pictured as being powerless to effect change in its community or in American agricultural policy, even though such change may be necessary for the church's survival in many rural areas. In effect, the last chapter points out what has happened to the rural church as a result of its continued use of some once powerful images that have become entrenched and thus impotent in today's world.

The rural church today is in need of renewed images which can provide it with an expanded self-understanding of its roles, purposes,

²D. Olson, Treating Relationships (Lake Mills, IA: Graphic, 1976), 275.

³Ibid., 372.

⁴Ibid., 542.

responsibilities, and relationships to God and to creation. Such images do not come about, however, without great effort and pain, for they are the result of reality's harsh intrusion into established complacency. New images and new self-understandings grow out of dramatic experiences which rudely dislodge us from our entrenched positions and force us to scramble for new footholds.⁵

The rural church is facing just such an intrusion of reality in the form of physical, social, and spiritual losses in rural communities. These trends have been dramatic enough to cause the leadership of many churches to reassess their positions and attempt various solutions in order to counteract these potentially disastrous developments. However, due to the entrenchment of their images and self-understandings, they have been virtually powerless to effect changes in these trends. The situation in rural churches today has developed to such a point of startling consequences that the birth of renewed images and new self-understandings is warranted.

The birth of these renewed images ought not to be accomplished in a vacuum. Rather, they should grow out of the reassessment and re-interpretation of old images, expanding them to meet present situations and needs. Two images which are firmly rooted in the past yet have extraordinary potential power for today are covenant and stewardship. The idea of covenant can provide the rural church with images which help define its purpose in the world and its relationship to both God and creation. The concept of stewardship can provide an

⁵Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, II, 682.

expanded definition of appropriate roles for the church in its community and add to an understanding of its responsibilities to God and the world.

These two images have been used by the church for thousands of years and have provided it with a sense of power and purpose.⁶ Today, however, the concepts of covenant and stewardship have become entrenched in the imagery of the church and, as a result, have been rendered largely powerless in today's world. If they could be resurrected, though--re-evaluated, expanded, made fluid--they could provide the church once again with a source of empowerment.

Exploring the Concept of Covenant⁷

The idea of covenant is perhaps as old as civilization itself. Over the millenia the idea of covenant has been used by various civilizations to express formally relationships between individuals, nations, gods, and every conceivable combination therein. So widespread has the use of the covenant idea been that it is conceivable that a nation or individual could trace its history through covenants. If this could be done, it is very likely that they would come to a fuller knowledge of their unique place in history and a broader self-understanding of

⁶D. McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978).

⁷There has been for some time an active debate within Old Testament scholarship as to the meaning, purpose, and use of covenant in the Old Testament. I have chosen to rely on the works of Mendenhall, Baltzer, and McCarthy at the suggestion of Loren Fisher, whose knowledge in this area I respect. At Fisher's suggestion, I hold up these authors as representative of the cutting edge of the current covenant debate, but the reader should take note that many other interpretations could be held up.

their present relationships and purposes.⁸

Given that the church's roots stretch back to ancient Israel, it may be possible to discover a renewed image of covenant through examining the history of covenant in the Judeo-Christian line. The many books and articles which have been written studying the various covenants between God and man seem to hold up three main developments in the idea of covenant over the past three thousand years.⁹ These three developments trace the growth of humanity's understanding of its unique relationships to God and the world and thus provide us with a sense of where we stand today in relation to the past.

The most ancient of these covenant images is discussed by George Mendenhall and Klaus Baltzer. According to Mendenhall, the unity of the Israelite people and their relationship with God was founded on covenant. As in all agreements or covenants between persons, there was implied or expressed a condition which is really a description of the sort of relationship into which they were entering and which appears as law. An important element of Mendenhall's discussion is a presentation of the structure of the ancient treaty as revealed in Hittite texts, and of the evidence for the possibility of Israelite-Hittite contacts.¹⁰ In light of these possible contacts, Mendenhall argues that the original form of the Israelite covenant, made on Sinai,

⁸McCarthy.

⁹D. McCarthy, Old Testament Covenant (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972), 90-108.

¹⁰G. D. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

was that of the Hittite treaties. Scholars who have continued Mendenhall's research have found that the basic legal idea of the contract in the treaties used by the Hittites is of Mesopotamian origin. In addition, there is evidence that some form of treaty relationship was much in use among the peoples known to us through the archives of Mari and the tablets from Alalakh. These have shown us that treaties were in use in Syria at a very early time, the eighteenth century, as well as in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries when Hittite influence was important. There are also treaties from the post-Hittite period, treaties involving peoples from Syria and Mesopotamia, especially the Assyrians, and these have been dated in the seventh century B.C.¹¹ It would seem then that this legal-literary form was used to express treaty relationships throughout two millennia of ancient near eastern history.

Klaus Baltzer supports this notion. He states that these treaties, although separated by hundreds of years, are composed according to a definite schema. His examination of texts from various archives representing Mesopotamian and Hittite cultures reveals the following structure:¹²

(1) Preamble: Comprising the name and title of the ruler issuing the document.

(2) Antecedent History: Comprising a description of the previous relationships between the ruler or the empire and the vassal

¹¹McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant, 25.

¹²K. Baltzer, Covenant Formulary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 11-16.

in question.

(3) Statement of Substance: Concerning the future relationship of the partners of the treaty.

(4) Specific Stipulations of the Treaty: Comprising conditional statements based on relationship statements.

(5) Invocation of the Gods as Witnesses: Constituting the conclusion of the agreement.

(6) Blessings or Curses: Guaranteeing that the stipulations of the treaty would be carried out.¹³

According to Baltzer, this schema can be found, with minor variations, in all the treaties of the ancient Near East. In fact, the schema remains so constant that, if a treaty is preserved only in fragments, they can be arranged in order, with a high degree of assurance, and one can also determine which parts are missing. Thus, a clear picture of the treaty formulary as a whole and of its individual components can be determined.

Treaties as they were understood in the ancient Near East were made between a great king and his vassal. The latter could have the rank of king or lord. Under certain conditions, a collective entity like the people of the land could be party to the treaty. Finally, one of the parties may have even been an entire nation. In each case the party with whom the great king concludes the treaty enters into a special relationship with the king in which they agree to adapt to the political or social structure of the land of their overlord.

¹³ Ibid.

Thus the treaties established certain obligations and responsibilities for both parties.

The use of the treaty formula seems to have been encouraged by the problem of an empire which sought to control outlying lands without outright annexation. The use of treaties would seem to indicate a desire by the overlord to exercise persuasive power rather than military power to achieve domination. The efforts of the great king to define vassal obligations and enforce them through an oath, rather than military presence, reflects an effort to give regulated validity to the relation of king and vassal and so to bring this relation more clearly into the overall order of things, which was guaranteed by divine control.¹⁴

This treaty form has been shown to be both very old and to have existed throughout the ancient Near East. According to Mendenhall, there is therefore no a priori reason to doubt that Israel knew and used the treaty form from the earliest times on. But does the form of the ancient treaty or something like it actually appear in the literature of the Old Testament? If there is a text beginning with a passage of a historical character used to introduce a series of stipulations which are terms governing a relationship between a sovereign and a subject and which are sanctioned by a blessing on obedience and a curse upon infidelity, such a text would indicate the presence of the treaty form in its fullest extent and establish that the treaty form

¹⁴ McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant, 5.

was indeed known in Israel.¹⁵ Is there therefore a text in the Old Testament which exemplifies the treaty form? The answer is yes--within the basic elements of the book of Deuteronomy. Mendenhall has shown some striking similarities between the treaty form and Deuteronomy by setting two texts side by side.

(1) Preamble

These are the words of the sun,
munatilis, the great king, king
of the land of Hatti, beloved
of the weather God

These are the words which Moses
spoke to Israel (DT 1:1)

(2) Antecedent History

When in former times Labarnas,
my grandfather, attacked the
lands of Arzawa and the lands
of Wilusa, he conquered it.
. . . The Land of Wilusa near
after fell away from the land
of Hatti, but . . . remained
friends with the king of Hatti

In the fortieth year . . . Moses
spoke to the people as Yahwe had
commanded him. . . After he had
conquered Sihon the King of the
Amorites . . . And Og the King of
Bashan (DT 1:3-4)

(3) Statement of Substance

Let someone read thee this
tablet which I have made for
thee three times a year

And thou shalt write on the stone
all the words of this law most
clearly (DT 27:8)

(4) Stipulations

Thou, Alaksandus shalt pro-
tect the sun as a friend! . . .
If anyone says an unfriendly
word about the sun and you keep
it secret from the sun . . .
Then thou sinnest before the
oath of the gods. Let the oath
of the gods harry thee

Thou shalt offer the passover
sacrifice to Yahwe thy God (DT 16:
2) If anyone is found stealing
one of his brothers to treat as
a slave then let that thief die
(DT 24:7)

(5) Invocations of the Gods as Witnesses

The Sun God of heaven, lord of
the lands, shepherd of men, the
sun goddess of Arinna, the queen
of the land, the weather God. . . .

(6) Curse and Blessing

If thou, Alaksandus, break the words of this document, which are placed on this document, then may these oaths wipe thee out. . . . And wipe thy seed from the face of the earth. But if thou keepest these words then may the thousand gods . . . keep thee, thy wife, thy sons . . . with friendly hand

If thou dost not obey the voice of Yahwe thy God by keeping His commandments . . . which I command thee today, then all these curses shall come upon thee. If thou obeyest the voice of Yahwe thy God by keeping His commandments which I have commanded thee today . . . then all these blessings shall come upon thee (DT 28:15, 1-2)

Given these remarkable similarities, it would appear that, through the use of the well-known treaty formula, early Israel was proclaiming its unique relationship to God in a form that would be readily recognizable to its neighbors. The image chosen by Israel at this time to express its understanding of its relationship to God was that of God as king and Israel as God's vassals or servants. This image reveals early Israel's self-understanding as being totally subservient to God. All aspects of life were to be ruled, not by an earthly monarch, but by God. This meant that the continued existence of any political or economic institutions was conditional upon obedience to the ethical norms stipulated by God in the covenant and that religious ethical obligations were now placed above political or economic structures.¹⁶

Israel at this time understood a strict legalistic or contractual structure to be present in its relationship with God and the world. God was the king, sole owner of all creation; Israel was God's servant who was given responsibility for the upkeep of God's creation.

¹⁶Ibid., 277-298.

Israel did not own creation or even its little corner of it. Israel was simply responsible for it, but responsible to God alone. No outside power whether god or king was to be put above God as the absolute monarch to whom Israel held allegiance.¹⁷

As the centuries passed, separating Israel's beginnings from its middle age, Israel's understanding of its relationship to God matured. New images grew up to take the place of old. These images did not deny what had come before, however, for they built on the old images, expanding them to fit new insights and developments.¹⁸

The second development in the idea of covenant is discussed by D. J. McCarthy. He states that, if we are to understand Israel's intent in using the treaty form during this time in its history, it is necessary to study the covenant that was of supreme importance to Israel. During this period of Israel's development, this was the covenant concluded on Sinai by which the union between God and the nation was finally constituted. In the view of the biblical writers,¹⁹ other covenants prepared the way for this, were modelled on this, and grew out of this; but the Sinai covenant was the covenant par excellence. According to McCarthy, if we consider the narrative of Sinai in the form in which it now finds itself, it presents an outline in which we can see some of the treaty form.²⁰ There is, in the account of the first

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 152.

²⁰ Ibid., 153.

conclusion of the covenant, in Exodus, chapters 19-24, a section containing antecedent history (19:3ff), a section containing stipulations (20-23:19), and a section containing ceremonies to ratify the alliance (24:1-11).

Striking in the form of the Sinai covenant, however, is what is missing. The lack of a preamble, a statement of substance, or the curse/blessing form is quite apparent. It would seem then that if the Sinai text in Exodus 19ff does reflect the treaty form, it reflects it only remotely.

According to McCarthy, the Exodus passage reveals an idea of covenant which is somewhat different from that exemplified in the treaty form. The emphasis in Exodus is on the rites, the covenant meal, and the sacrifice, as constituting the alliance between God and Israel. This reveals an idea of covenant in which the ritual looms larger than the verbal and contractual. It reflects a covenant grounded on God's majestic presence in every aspect of creation and involves a proclamation of his will to be followed in all aspects of our existence. It would seem that Israel adopted this quasi-treaty form to express its unique relationship to God and to state the obligations it believed were inherent in that relationship. By using a form similar to that of the Near Eastern treaties, Israel was proclaiming the kingship of God in a form that would be recognizable to all surrounding nations. Inherent in this proclamation was Israel's allegiance to God alone, Israel's belief in God as its primary overlord, and its disregard for all earthly rulers. Thus Israel proclaimed the kingship of God and

acknowledged God's law as binding in every aspect of its culture, i.e., political, economic, and social.²¹

Israel accomplished more than simply proclaiming the kingship of God by its use of this quasi-treaty form, for it established a relationship with God that was reflective of a familial relationship. The Sinai covenant proclaimed God as the "head" of the nation of Israel, as the father. The stipulations were not the terms of a treaty between a king and his vassal, but rather the conditions covering continued union within the family.²² Thus the covenant at Sinai reflected Israel's sonship. It is a relationship effected by a rite (rites, covenant meal of sacrifice) revealed by a mediator (Moses), and enacted annually to remind Israel of this relationship forever.²³

This second development in the history of covenant provides a more intimate understanding of the relationship between God and Israel. Gone is the image of God as king and Israel as vassal, and with it the legalistic or contractual relationship of God, Israel, creation in that order. This image has been replaced by a more powerful image of God as father and Israel as God's children. God is still the creator and thus deserving of thanks and praise for creation; but now the relationship has been made more intimate, for Israel has a share of creation. Israel believed itself to be the child of God and thus heir to God's kingdom. No longer were they to have responsibility with no claim.

²¹Ibid., 155.

²²Ibid., 165.

²³Ibid., 147.

Now they saw the maintenance of creation, not simply as an awesome responsibility, but as a legacy given to them by God the father which they would pass on to their children in turn.²⁴

As Israel continued to mature, it added to this image of covenant as a familial relationship between itself and God. This growth, however, rather than being open and inclusive, took the opposite course. More and more stipulations were added governing the terms of membership in God's family until the image became extremely exclusivistic, allowing for only a few to be included in God's covenant. Thus while the original understanding of covenant included all Jews as God's children, the image was now focused to include only a few select Jews. In partial defense of this development, it must be said that this exclusivism was the result of efforts to protect the image of God as father and sole authority for Israel from outside contamination.²⁵ What those who held this belief failed to realize, however, was that disobedient children or those Jews who failed to do God's will through obeying all his laws were not any less children of God; they were simply disrespectful children or unfaithful children, or uncaring children, but they were still God's children all the same.

The great strength of this covenant image was that, if one understands oneself to be a child of God, then one cannot be thrown out of the household as a mere servant would. This is the strength

²⁴Ibid., 277-298.

²⁵G. E. Mendenhall, "Old Testament Covenant," in Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), I, 714-723.

of the father-child image over the king-servant image that preceded it.²⁶

The third major development in this evolving image of covenant came about as a reaction against this exclusivistic, entrenched path the image of covenant was taking. The great spokesman for this movement to reinterpret the image of covenant was Jesus of Nazareth, and it is in the message of Jesus that we find a new image of covenant emerge.²⁷

Although the word covenant is not used extensively in the New Testament, the idea of covenant as an image for establishing relationships and purposes is used. As we have seen, the fundamental purpose of covenant as it was used by both ancient Near Eastern civilizations and Israel was to bind together two parties in a firm relationship. This binding process is magnified in the New Testament concept of covenant. It centers on Christ and holds up the idea that through the new covenant the church and Christ are inseparably linked. This relationship to Christ is both the content and obligation of the new covenant and, because of Christ, all the detailed prescriptions of Jewish law which had resulted in the exclusive nature of covenant were swept away and made unnecessary.

In Ephesians 2:12-13, Paul writes that the Gentiles, once strangers to the covenants of the promise and far off, have been brought near in the blood of Christ. In Galatians 4:21-28, the old and new covenants are contrasted as the children of slavery and those born free. In II Corinthians 3:6, the new covenant of which Paul is

²⁶ McCarthy, Old Testament Covenant, 65.

²⁷ Mendenhall, "Old Testament Covenant," I, 722.

a minister is a covenant in the spirit, in contrast to a written code. Paul seems to be expressing an idea which is present in the gospels as well as other New Testament books, which is that the new covenant established by Jesus is a rejection of the detailed stipulations of religious obligations characteristic of Jewish covenant law.

Because the new covenant is a rejection of the entrenchment and exclusivistic nature of the old covenant rather than the idea of covenant itself, the New Testament writers do not completely reject the old covenant but rather show how it must be reinterpreted in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3:16, Paul applies the covenant of Abraham to Christ. It is ironical, but consistent with the notion of rejecting entrenchment, that the blessing of the nations takes the form of delivering them from the curse of the law which came after Abraham, in addition to the promise of the spirit through faith.

In the letter to the Hebrews, every possible argument is drawn upon to show that the new covenant both fulfills and builds on the old. In 7:1-22, the passage of Psalms 110:4 is applied to Jesus with the conclusion that Jesus is the mediator and surety of a better covenant. Chapter 8 strongly argues that the old covenant is obsolete, drawing on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and, in subsequent chapter 9, the concern for levitical purity is constructed with the purifying of the conscience by the blood of Christ. The regular repeated sacrifices of Old Testament law are contrasted sharply with the once-and-for-all sacrifice in which Christ gave his own blood to put away sin.

The above rejections and reinterpretations of the old covenant idea based on law points to the notion that the New Testament

experience of Christ was one which could not be contained within the framework of a quasi-legal terminology or pattern of thought and action. Neither the act of God in Christ nor the religious obligations of humanity to God could be adequately expressed in language. Therefore the word became flesh, and thus brought the message of God to humanity firsthand.²⁸

The message that was brought was a freeing message and an inclusive message, for it both freed the notion of covenant from its stagnation and it opened the image of covenant to all the peoples of the earth. No longer was the familial relationship between God the father and mankind to be the exclusive right of Israel. Jesus opened this relationship to all of humanity making of us, as Paul states in Romans 8:16-17, joint heirs in the kingdom of God. No longer was this familial relationship to be solely dependent upon keeping laws or obeying obligations, for the stipulations of the Old Testament covenant were replaced by the command to love, a command which was not really a command but rather an announcement of the very nature of the new relationship between God and humanity.²⁹

This new concept of covenant uses the image of God as father and all of humanity as God's adopted children. Each child in this family of God must make his or her own decision to become a member of the household or remain outside. Gone is the notion that one is automatically a child of God by right of birth and in its place is the

²⁸Ibid., I, 722-723.

²⁹Ibid.

notion of choice. This idea of humanity as God's adopted children sets the stage for a new self-understanding of our relationships and purposes in creation. However, before this new understanding can be fully explored, we must first take a look at a second image which provides us with a sense of our responsibility and roles within this expanded image of covenant.

Exploring the Concept of Stewardship

According to Douglass Hall, "There are about twenty-six references to steward and stewardship in the Bible as a whole."³⁰ "A steward," says Hall, "is someone who is charged with responsibility for the management and service of something that belongs to someone else. Usually the owner or master to whom the steward is accountable is a king or ruler."³¹ Thus Hall states that

in chapters 43 and 44 of Genesis, the steward of whom we hear is a man accountable to Joseph, the young Jew who rose in the court of Egypt to be second only to Pharaoh. Similarly, the first Book of Chronicles refers to the many stewards of King David and at one point lists them all by name, each according to the area of his particular responsibility (27:31).³²

"The Bible is clear," says Hall,

about the status of the steward: stewards are not masters, and when they take unto themselves attitudes and practices which might be legitimate in masters or owners, they are severely chastised. In Isaiah 22:15, there is a scathing reference to a king's steward who has done precisely that. The prophet is therefore commanded

³⁰ D. Hall, This World Must Not Be Abandoned (Toronto: Anglican Church of Canada), 5.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

to tell this steward that on account of his personal ambition, God is going to hurl him away violently and thrust him from his office and replace him by another more trustworthy person, who will remember that his place is to serve his master and not to build empires for himself. The passage strongly upholds the accountability of the steward to his lord with the implicit distinction between stewardship and ownership.³³

According to Hall,

the picture presented in the Old Testament of the steward as servant-manager of something/someone not belonging to him is also the most obvious meaning of some of the New Testament passages in which reference to stewardship is found (e.g., Matthew 20:8, Luke 9:3, John 2:8).³⁴

Hall states that

there is, however, in the New Testament a certain development in the idea of stewardship which takes on theological and metaphorical meaning which, while implicit in Old Testament passages like Isaiah 22 now becomes explicit in certain key passages in the New Testament. Thus in Luke 12:42ff where steward and servant are used interchangeably, stewardship together with watchfulness are characteristic marks of Christ's true followers.³⁵

"The master referred to here," says Hall,

— is not an earthly king or lord but Christ himself. The disciples, during the Christ's earthly absence, are charged with responsibility for his household. As stewards of their lord's household, the disciples are responsible for those who dwell there--to see to it that they are properly "fed," to keep away "thieves" who would rob them of their treasures, to keep watch over their Lord's "possessions." These disciple-stewards are warned--in a way reminiscent of the Isaiah passage--that stewards who forget their place and begin to assume that they are in charge, or are at liberty to do as they please with the servants, will be severely punished.³⁶

"It is true," Hall reports,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid.

that the stewards are regarded here (as in the Old Testament passages) as being a notch higher on the ladder of authority than ordinary manservants and maidservants; but what from one standpoint is their superior authority is from another their greater responsibility. Thus the passage ends with a summary-statement which has had great importance for all serious discussion of the meaning of stewardship: "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much will they demand the more" (Luke 12:48b).³⁷

Hall goes on to state that

in Pauline and other epistles, this parabolic treatment of stewardship becomes more directly doctrinal. Paul, in I Corinthians 4:1-2, applies the concept of the steward explicitly to himself as an apostle and implicitly to the Church at large. One notes again how this reference is set in a context of warning: Christians ought not to act according to the ways of the world, where people try to make names for themselves to form "parties" around this or that "great" person:

. . . let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's (3:21-22).

--an ecumenical-ecological statement if ever there was one! We are all bound up with one another; no one can claim or have claimed for him or her any independent dignity, authority, or riches. Even Jesus Christ himself is accountable--even He is God's steward. Therefore,,

This is how one should regard us [i.e., Paul and his associates--but implicitly the Church at large]--as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy . . . etc." (4:1-2).

Here the "property" for which the Christian steward has responsibility is not the material effects of a royal household, or noble prisoners like Daniel and his companions, or the accoutrements of a feast as in John 2:8, but the "mysteries of God"--that is, the Gospel itself, which is intended for the whole human family, God's "household."³⁸

"This same theological nuance," suggests Hall,

is assigned to the metaphor of the steward by Paul in Ephesians. But here the context adds another dimension to the meaning of the

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

³⁸ Ibid.

steward idea for the early Christians. Paul reminds these Gentile Christians that they, formerly "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world," have now through Christ been "brought near":

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple of the Lord; in whom you are also built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (2:19ff).

Then the reference to stewardship:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles--assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written . . . etc.³⁹

The new dimension in this important passage is what Hall calls the "dimension of participation."⁴⁰

Though the steward of God, like the stewards of earthly lords, can claim nothing for himself, he is not merely an outsider--"hired help," so to speak. Rather, he participates in the very "household of God." Precisely as one who participates in this household and its blessings, he is called (and enabled) to share "this grace" (verse 8) with others and--as Paul has done for his hearers at Ephesus--bring them too into God's household.⁴¹

This, Hall states,

in a real sense, offsets the other side of the Bible's discussion of stewardship--its negative side, if you like--namely the oft-repeated warning that stewards are only stewards, not masters or owners. While this is certainly sustained by Paul, the Ephesians' reference to stewardship accentuates the "high" meaning of this metaphor: the steward is him/herself a participant in the very bounty for whose management and distribution he/she has responsibility.⁴²

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 8.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

Exploring the Entrenchment of Images
Within the Rural Church

It was suggested above that the rural church today is in need of renewed images which can provide it with an expanded self-understanding of its roles, purposes, responsibilities, and relationships to God and creation and within its community and society at large. It was further suggested that this need has resulted from the entrenchment of certain images which are basic to the formation of the rural church's self-understanding. Thus the entrenchment of these foundation images is partly responsible for the rural church's ineffectiveness in addressing the problems facing rural America today.

By using the images of covenant and stewardship and the ways in which these images have been expanded by the people of God over the centuries, the possibility of discerning to what degree the rural church's images of covenant and stewardship have become entrenched and in what ways this entrenchment has limited the rural church's self-understandings, and thus its effectiveness, is possible.

In studying the various books and articles written on the concept of covenant in recent years, it can be seen that, in general, the rural church has held to an image of its relationship to God which falls somewhere between the king-vassal image and the legalistic father-child image held by Israel prior to the New Testament.⁴³ As a result, the rural church's understanding of its relationship to God

⁴³P. Jegen, The Earth Is the Lord's (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

and its purpose in creation has taken on a legalistic air. It is legalistic in that it sees God as the sole authority in creation, possessing all knowledge and power, and thus sets up a one-way relationship of need where God is the giver and humanity is the passive receiver. It is also legalistic in that it conceives its purpose to be the interpretation of God's laws to humanity, thus setting itself up as the mediator of God's covenant to the people of the earth.

In regard to the rural church's concept of stewardship, it can be seen that, in general, the church has held to an image which is similar to the Old Testament image of household manager or head servant.⁴⁴ This image upholds the idea that God has given to the church the role of manager, a role which entails great responsibilities but no ownership. As a result, the rural church's understanding of its role in, and responsibilities to, creation has taken on a non-participatory air. That is, the rural church has not conceived of itself as having any role in creation beyond that of responsibility for seeing to it that creation be used in accordance with the commands of God. The rural church's role and responsibility is to maintain the God-given order to creation and to remain faithful to the commands of God. Thus the rural church has been content to let God's will be done and has not presumed to interfere in the process.

The combined effect of these images of covenant and stewardship upon the rural church's ability to impact the problems facing rural America has been significant, for it has been in part responsible for

⁴⁴T. Anderson, Christian Responsibility and the Stewardship Ethic (Toronto: Toronto School of Theology, 1981).

the rural church's apparent failure to analyze the underlying causes of rural loss and its apparent failure to enact positive changes in the rural situation, both of which have, in turn, resulted in the church's feelings of powerlessness in the rural communities in which it serves.

In terms of the rural church's apparent failure to analyze underlying causes, one can see that with a basic self-understanding which neither sees itself as having any role in creation beyond the interpretation of God's will, nor as having any responsibility other than to maintain the present understandings of God's purposes for creation, it is extremely difficult for the rural church to address issues which demand a more perceptive understanding of both its roles and responsibilities in creation, in light of present-day realities. Similarly, in terms of the rural church's apparent failure to enact positive changes in rural communities, one can see that with a basic self-understanding which holds that God is the sole authority in creation, possessing all knowledge and power, and sees itself as the passive recipient of God's will for creation, it is difficult for the rural church to place itself in a position which calls for a shared sense of ownership and a sense of power over one's own future before action can occur.

Using Renewed Images to Assist Ministry in the Rural Church

Although it is impossible to generalize to all churches, the above discussion does represent a trend in the rural church today toward exclusivism, legalism, paternalism, and passivity. This trend

has left the rural church with little foundation with which to address the fundamental problem facing rural America today which is its lost sense of relationship to God and creation.

A new sense of relationship could be discovered by the rural church if it could turn its exclusivism into connectiveness, its legalism into wholism, its paternalism into a sense of shared responsibility, and its passivity into action. This could be accomplished if the rural church would exchange its present images and thus its entrenched basic self-understanding for renewed images which could provide it with an expanded self-understanding and, in turn, a new foundation from which to address the problems facing rural America today.

By combining the concepts of covenant and stewardship discussed above, an expanded image emerges which can provide the rural church with a renewed sense of its role, purpose, responsibility, and relationships to God and creation. In terms of the rural church's responsibilities, the image of stewardship which supports the idea that we are participants in creation, or in effect co-creators with God, could give to the rural church a sense of shared responsibility for creation. According to this image, we are no longer passive servants waiting for God to act--rather, we see ourselves as active, formative forces in the shaping of the future and thus responsible not only to God but to each other and to our children, for seeing to it that creation thrives and is not damaged beyond all hope of recovery.

With respect to the rural church's role and purpose, the image of covenant and stewardship which upholds the idea that all creation is connected by virtue of being bound up in Christ, can give the

church a sense of connectiveness which overshadows its old exclusivistic, legalistic notions, and opens its eyes to the realities that whatever we do to creation will eventually be felt by us. The rural church's role and purpose, then, are to uphold this notion of connectedness and make clear our relatedness to each other and to creation. Adopting these images means we can no longer see ourselves as isolated from the effects of our deeds upon each other or the earth. We must now see that whatever we loose upon creation, we loose upon ourselves as well.

In regard to the rural church's relationship to God and creation, the image of covenant which holds that each one of us is free to enter the family of God as adopted children can give the church a sense of joint ownership for, and responsibility to, creation. Gone is the notion that God alone owns creation and we are merely servants responsible only to God. We now see ourselves as joint heirs in God's kingdom, sharing responsibility for creation with those who came before as well as being responsible for maintaining creation in trust for those who are yet to come to the rich legacy of creation given to us by God.

This renewed self-understanding, if adopted by the rural church, could provide it with the means by which it might take the first steps in bringing strength back to rural communities. This strengthening of rural communities would be facilitated by the church through providing a new awareness of the problems facing rural America today. This new awareness results from perceiving the problems not as passive servants but as responsible co-creators who have a real interest in preserving creation by virtue of joint ownership and who have a responsibility to generations to come for the preservation of our shared

legacy.

The strengthening of rural communities would further be facilitated through providing a foundation for analysis of the underlying causes of the problems facing rural America. This analysis would contrast the wholistic image of connectiveness which teaches us that all creation is dependent upon balances, with the realities of brokenness and destruction present in today's rural communities. Finally it would be facilitated through providing a basis for action. This action would be the result of our belief that, as co-creators we can make a difference in the shape of reality and that as responsible joint heirs, we must act in order to preserve the legacy entrusted to us by our ancestors for those who are to receive it in the future.

Summary

The rural church today has been largely powerless in effecting change in its community or in American agricultural policy, even though such change may be necessary for the church's survival in many rural areas. This powerlessness can be seen in part as the result of the rural church's inability to address rural problems adequately. This can be seen as resulting from its continued use of some once-powerful images that have become entrenched within the life of the church and thus impotent in helping to define the church's self-understanding in today's world.

The rural church today is thus in need of renewed images which can provide it with an expanded self-understanding of its roles, purposes, responsibilities, and relationships to God, creation, its

community, and society at large. Such images do not come about, however, without great effort and pain, for they are the result of reality's harsh intrusion into established complacency. New images and new self-understandings grow out of dramatic experiences which rudely dislodge us from our entrenched positions and force us to scramble for new footholds.

The rural church is facing just such an intrusion of reality in the form of physical, social, and spiritual losses in rural communities. These trends have been so dramatic that they have caused the leadership of many churches to reassess their positions and attempt various solutions in order to counteract these potentially disastrous developments. Due to the entrenchment of their images and thus their self-understanding, they have been virtually powerless to effect changes in these trends. The situation in rural churches today has developed to such a point of startling consequences that the birth of renewed images and renewed self-understandings is warranted.

By combining the concepts of covenant and stewardship as they have been expanded by the people of God over the last three thousand years, a renewed image emerges which can provide the rural church with an expanded sense of its role, purpose, responsibility, and relationship to God and creation. In terms of the church's responsibilities, the image of stewardship which supports the idea that we are participants in creation or in effect co-creators with God could give to the rural church a sense of shared responsibility for creation. According to this image, we are no longer passive servants waiting for God to act--rather, we now see ourselves as active, formative forces in

the shaping of the future, and thus responsible not only to God but to each other and to our children for seeing to it that creation thrives and is not damaged beyond all hope of recovery.

With respect to the rural church's role and purpose, the images of covenant and stewardship which uphold the idea that all creation is connected by virtue of being bound up in Christ can give the church a sense of connectiveness which overshadows its old exclusivistic, legalistic notions, and opens its eyes to the realities that whatever we do to creation will eventually be felt by us. The rural church's role and purpose then is to uphold this notion of connectiveness and make clear our relatedness to each other and to creation.

In regard to the church's relationship to God and creation, the image of covenant, which holds that each one of us is free to enter the family of God as adopted children, can give the church a sense of joint ownership for, and responsibility to, creation. Gone is the notion that God alone owns creation and we are merely servants responsible only to God. We now see ourselves as joint heirs in God's kingdom, sharing responsibility for creation with those who came before as well as being responsible for maintaining creation in trust for those who are yet to come to the rich legacy of creation given to us by God.

This renewed self-understanding, if adopted by the rural church, could provide it with the means by which it might take the first steps in bringing strength back to rural communities. This strengthening of rural communities would be facilitated by the church through providing a new awareness of the problems facing rural America today. This new awareness results from perceiving the problems not as passive

servants but as responsible co-creators who have a real interest in preserving by virtue of joint ownership and who have responsibility to generations to come for the preservation of our shared legacy.

The strengthening of rural communities would further be facilitated through providing a foundation for analysis of the underlying causes of the problems facing rural America. This analysis would contrast the wholistic image of connectiveness, which teaches that all creation is dependent upon balances, with the realities of brokenness and destruction present in today's rural communities.

Finally, strengthening would be facilitated through providing a basis for action. This action would be the result of our belief that as co-creators we can make a difference in the shape of reality and that as responsible joint heirs we must act in order to preserve the legacy entrusted to us by our ancestors for those who are to receive it in the future.

Chapter IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

American agriculture is far different today than it was at the turn of the century. New Technology has allowed farmers to produce more crops in less time using less labor than was ever imagined before. Technology has allowed this country to produce a great amount of food and many structures have grown up in order to support this end. Most of these structures are either political, economic, or social; but all support the use of high Technology farming methods.

As a result of these new structures and the Technology supporting them, many negative consequences have arisen. Among these is a significant deterioration of land, air, and water resources and quality. Also these structures, especially the corporate farming structures, can be seen as producing negative consequences upon people primarily in terms of their health and lifestyle patterns.

The consequences of modern Technology upon the way America farms confront the church in the rural community. The impact of modern Technology on rural communities has been both widespread and destructive. It has affected in some way practically every rural community in the United States and has been so pervasive that it has damaged not only the physical makeup of rural communities, but the social and spiritual as well. As a result of modern Technology and its supporting structures, rural communities have changed dramatically over the last seventy-five

years. Once rich in the basic substances needed to produce crops, rural communities today find themselves nearing the end of a once-believed inexhaustible supply of soil, water, and air.

Rural communities further find themselves daily being deprived of their lifeblood in the form of low profit margins, population losses, service and business relocation, and the collapse of community structures. Thus the once-socially stable rural community finds itself in the midst of an extremely unstable social climate. Finally, the community that was once regarded as possessing an extraordinary sense of direction and purpose today finds itself experiencing an acute sense of powerlessness and dislocation. This loss of spiritual strength has left the rural community searching for images to bring meaning back to life and a goal for which it can once again strive.

Traditionally the church was regarded as the community's prime source of direction and purpose and served to provide the community with goals to strive for and images to live out of. Today, however, the rural church has been directly affected by the physical, social, and spiritual losses experienced in the communities it serves. As a result, the rural church of today has lost membership, income, power, prestige, leadership, influence, and many of its traditional functions within the communities it serves. The church in rural America today is sick, and in many cases dying, and the tragedy is that it seems to be able to do little to halt the trends which threaten its survival.

In part, the inability of the church to address rural problems adequately lies in its inability to discern underlying causes. Its apparent failure in this regard lies in its willingness to accept the

most obvious cause as also the most fundamental. Because of this, the rural church often spends vast amounts of time and energy fighting structures and organizations that have little to do with the fundamental problems.

The church's inability to address rural problems adequately lies in another direction as well. Many pastors and church leaders, searching for a more potent tool with which to understand rural problems, have come to the conclusion that physical, social, and spiritual losses are not the result of the most obvious causes resulting from Technology, but rather they have concluded that the problem lies within the human spirit, within our inability to understand our relationship to God and to creation. If this is indeed the cause, then it is only by expanding its attitudes toward God and creation that the church can hope to begin to halt the destruction presently taking place in rural America. To this end many church leaders have called for a return to the traditional sacred teachings of the church in order to provide a basis for change. Unfortunately, this movement has had little impact within rural communities due to the chasm in today's world between the sacred and the secular.

The rural church today has been largely powerless in effecting change in its community or in American agricultural policy, even though such change may be necessary for the church's survival in many rural areas. This powerlessness can be seen in part as the result of the rural church's inability to address rural problems adequately. This can be seen as resulting from its continued use of some once-powerful images that have become entrenched within the life of the church and

thus impotent in helping to define the church's self-understanding in today's world.

The rural church today is thus in need of renewed images which can provide it with an expanded self-understanding of its roles, purposes, responsibilities, and relationships to God, creation, its community, and society at large. Such images do not come about, however, without great effort and pain, for they are the result of reality's harsh intrusion into established complacency. New images and new self-understandings grow out of dramatic experiences which rudely dislodge us from our entrenched positions and force us to scramble for new footholds.

The rural church is facing just such an intrusion of reality in the form of physical, social, and spiritual losses in rural communities. These trends have been so dramatic that they have caused the leadership of many churches to reassess their positions and attempt various solutions in order to counteract these potentially disastrous developments. Due to the entrenchment of their images and thus their self-understanding, they have been virtually powerless to effect changes in these trends. The situation in rural churches today has developed to such a point of startling consequences that the birth of renewed images and renewed self-understandings is warranted.

By combining the concepts of covenant and stewardship as they have been expanded by the people of God over the last three thousand years, a renewed image emerges which can provide the rural church with an expanded sense of its role, purpose, responsibility, and relationship to God and creation. In terms of the church's responsibilities,

the image of stewardship which supports the idea that we are participants in creation or in effect co-creators with God could give to the rural church a sense of shared responsibility for creation. According to this image, we are no longer passive servants waiting for God to act--rather, we now see ourselves as active, formative forces in the shaping of the future and thus responsible not only to God, but to each other and to our children for seeing to it that creation thrives and is not damaged beyond all hope of recovery.

With respect to the rural church's role and purpose, the images of covenant and stewardship which uphold the idea that all creation is connected by virtue of being bound up in Christ can give the church a sense of connectiveness which overshadows its old exclusivistic, legalistic notions, and opens its eyes to the realities that whatever we do to creation will eventually be felt by us. The rural church's role and purpose then is to uphold this notion of connectiveness and make clear our relatedness to each other and to creation.

In regard to the church's relationship to God and creation, the image of covenant, which holds that each one of us is free to enter the family of God as adopted children, can give the church a sense of joint ownership for and responsibility to creation. Gone is the notion that God alone owns creation and we are merely servants responsible only to God. We now see ourselves as joint heirs in God's kingdom, sharing responsibility for creation with those who came before as well as being responsible for maintaining creation in trust for those who are yet to come to the rich legacy of creation given to us by God.

This renewed self-understanding, if adopted by the rural church,

could provide it with the means by which it might take the first steps in bringing strength back to rural communities. This strengthening of rural communities would be facilitated by the church through providing a new awareness of the problems facing rural America today. This new awareness results from perceiving the problems not as passive servants but as responsible co-creators who have a real interest in preserving creation by virtue of joint ownership and who have responsibility to generations to come for the preservation of our shared legacy.

The strengthening of rural communities would further be facilitated through providing a foundation for analysis of the underlying causes of the problems facing rural America. This analysis would contrast the wholistic image of connectiveness, which teaches that all creation is dependent upon balances, with the realities of brokenness and destruction present in today's rural communities.

Finally, strengthening would be facilitated through providing a basis for action. This action would be the result of our belief that as co-creators we can make a difference in the shape of reality and that as responsible heirs we must act in order to preserve the legacy entrusted to us by our ancestors for those who are to receive it in the future.

Conclusions

It is my hope that pastors and other rural church leaders might use the content of this project as a foundation from which to begin the process of strengthening rural communities. To this end I would like to suggest several steps which I believe may help the church attain

this goal.

First I would remind you that the problems facing rural communities are extremely complex. Thus, few church members are likely to be aware of the extent of the problems within their own community. I suggest, therefore, that individual churches conduct a detailed examination of the communities in which they serve, specifically looking for signs of physical, social, or spiritual loss. Along with this examination should be some attempt to discern the apparent cause of these problems and some determination as to whether they are linked to high Technology farming methods, supporting structures, or some other factor. This process of awareness-building should help to clarify for the church the extent to which healthy rural life in its community has been disturbed.

The ways in which rural churches respond to the revelation that all is not well within their communities depends in no small measure on how they interpret the meanings and causes of the problems they face.

The assumption of this project has been that the underlying cause of the physical, social, and spiritual losses experienced within rural communities is spiritual rather than Technological in nature. This position may not, however, be generally held by rural church members. If this is indeed the case, I would hope that the renewed images of covenant and stewardship discussed in this project would provide the church with a foundation from which a new awareness and a new sensitivity toward the trends threatening healthy rural life might be reached.

Using this new awareness and sensitivity as a guideline, the

church's next step toward strengthening rural communities should be learning how to say no.

The three most powerful social movements in this country in the past fifty years began as protests. People--morally outraged and at long last out of patience--began to say no. No to Jim Crow. No to the war in Vietnam. No to male domination. No to policies, structures, institutions, ways of seeing things, and ways of doing things that dehumanized. The church must learn to say no.¹

It is reasonable to assume that no policymaker has ever rejected a policy proposal no matter how outrageous that proposal was for fear that the American religious community "wouldn't stand for it." Rural churches have probably given the impression that they will stand for anything and thus have often blessed injustice by giving it the consent of their silence. The rural church must learn to say no.

This protest, however, needs to be balanced by a vigorous advocacy, and so the fourth step which I believe should be taken by the church toward strengthening rural communities is advocacy. The rural church needs to increase its capacity to identify the underlying issues at stake in every agricultural policy consideration, to press persuasively the claims of the policies it recommends, and to change the way policymakers think about what is right and wrong in U.S. agricultural policy. The rural church needs such soundness of analysis, clarity of thought, and depth of social passion in order to command the respect of policymakers and help win their consent.

Finally, I believe the rural church needs a new vision; a

¹Conclusions paraphrased from Identifying a Food Policy, Agenda for the 1980s, a working paper (Washington: Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Food Policy, 1980), 10.

vision not only of what rural communities are today, but what they might be tomorrow. This vision should be wholistic, a vision of the whole, a truly global vision, and Utopian so that it might stimulate the social imagination of the rural church in ways that break old patterns of response and enable the church to formulate creative new policy options. Moreover, the rural church and the larger religious community of which it is a part need to learn to engage in what William Lee Miller calls "high politics." High politics, says Miller, "is not the art of the possible, it is the art of enlarging what is possible and of making what has hereto been impossible come into the range of what can be considered." The urgency of the crisis threatening healthy rural life in America demands nothing less.²

²Ibid.

VITA

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